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a novelette by Erle Stanley Gardner

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK, *Publisher* • ELLERY QUEEN, *Editor*

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Introductory Notes
by Erle Stanley Gardner

Some twenty-five years ago a new force vitalized the field of fiction.

Mystery writers began telling stories.

The old-fashioned mystery story dealing with deduction, a recapitulation of the clues midway in the story, and a detective who "slipped something into his pocket while the police detective was looking the other way," was thrown out of the window. In its place there came a new, virile type of story told in terms of action. The reader, moreover, was given an equal break with the detective.

Those were the days when the wood-pulp magazines were at their zenith. The public eagerly devoured the stories. While it didn't demand characterization in the best literary style, it did demand a story.

A lot of slush has been written about the pulps, principally by writers who knew the market only by hearsay.

It is true, as has been so frequently charged, that the better pulp writers, being paid by the word, ground out a terrific wordage. They were able to do this, however, only because they had imagination. The telling of the story may have been crude, but the writers always had a story to tell.

Characters may have been sketched with broad strokes. There was certainly no time for subtlety. But the writer of that period either had ingenuity, imagination, and a touch of novelty, or he went broke.

Lester Leith was a typical character of *the pulps, and written* for *the pulps. The Leith stories were batted out at terrific speed in a white heat of creative imagination, and they were popular — so popular, in fact, that now when I would like to retire Lester Leith from the public eye, it is impossible to find any place of concealment where his admirers won't follow and demand that they be given at least a glimpse of their old friend. It has been some twenty years since Leith made his first bow to a reading public which has refused to forget him.*

A constant trickle of letters arrives at my ranch from reader-fans who like Perry Mason, but are stirred by a nostalgic desire to compare him with Lester Leith. I believe it is a matter of record that there has been a persistent demand made upon "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" to have Lester Leith once more appear in print.

Realizing that these stories were the stories of a period, I have refused for years to grant reprint rights. The reading public, however, has its rights. The success of the character depended upon the loyal support of the readers. True, I created the character, but the readers were the ones who

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made him popular. And if these readers want him back, they certainly are entitled to more than a curt refusal.

So I have finally given permission to my good friends who edit "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" to publish a half-dozen or more of these stories. They are stories of a period, but by their re-publication readers will be able once more to greet the dapper, ingenious chap who insisted that there was a higher code of ethics than that contained in our stereotyped laws relating to personal property.

Or, as Lester Leith has frequently expressed it, there was nothing which could be a greater punishment for crime than depriving the criminal of his ill-gotten gains — particularly when the crook was beyond the reach of the law's long arm.

At such times, Lester Leith would duck under the groping but impotent arm of the law and deftly deprive the crook of his spoils by a sleight-of-hand which was founded upon sheer mental agility, leaving a trail broad enough to lead the police to the original culprit, yet never so plain that the police could trap Lester Leith.

So, to you readers who have insisted upon seeing Lester Leith once more, may I call to your attention the fact that the character has not changed, but the times have changed.

Remember we are turning back the literary pages from fifteen to twenty years. Styles in fiction, as in women's skirts, are subject to great variations, but the underlying attractions are basic, and a good story is still a good story.

LESTER LEITH, IMPERSONATOR

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Lester Leith stood before the mirror, adjusting the white tie of his evening clothes with the deft fingers of an expert craftsman. Behind him, the police undercover man, who posed as his valet, held the tailed coat with a characteristic air of obsequious servitude.

Having adjusted the tie to suit his fancy, Leith permitted the valet to assist him with his coat, and the big undercover man made a great show of whisking a brush over the shoulders in a last, deferential gesture.

"How is it, Scuttle?" Leith asked.

"Very good, sir."

Leith yawned, consulted his wrist watch. "Well," he said, "there's a good half-hour before I need to leave."

"Yes, sir. A cocktail, sir?"

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"Oh, I think not, Scuttle. Just a cigarette and a book."

The spy, moving his huge bulk upon self-effacing tiptoes, eased over to the library table, and surreptitiously folded the evening paper so that the photograph of a smiling young man, holding a white feather between his thumb and forefinger, would be visible to anyone standing near the table.

Leith strolled over to the bookcase, selected a book, and turned back toward his favorite reclining chair. He stopped to stare at the folded newspaper.

"What the devil's this, Scuttle?" he asked.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. Rather an interesting case, sir. A man who habitually carries in his wallet a white feather."

"A white feather, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir. He says it brings him luck because it teaches him prudence. Whenever he's inclined to plunge in a poker game, he looks in his wallet, sees the white feather, and is convinced that it's prudent to play a conservative game."

Lester Leith frowned. "It sounds like a silly system to me, Scuttle."

"Yes, sir."

"A man never makes anything by being conservative, Scuttle. He *makes* his pile by plunging. *After* he's made his pile, he becomes conservative."

Lester Leith stared again at the photograph of the thin man with a sardonic smile whose thumb and forefinger held the fluffy white feather up against the dark background formed by the iron bars of a jail door.

"Who is he, Scuttle?"

"Rodney Alcott, sir."

"And what's he done to get himself in jail and his picture in the newspaper?"

The spy's eyes glittered as he saw that Leith was taking the bait. "The police don't know, sir."

"I see," Leith said. "Typical police methods. They don't know what the man's done — therefore, they throw him in jail. That's a jail door in the background of the photograph, is it not, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

Leith concentrated his attention on the white feather shown in the picture. "How long has he had this peculiar pocket piece, Scuttle?"

"He says for more than a year. It's always in his wallet."

Lester Leith put down his book, and walked across his apartment to stand smoking in front of the window. The big police spy watched him with glittering, anxious eyes.

"What do the police *think* he's done?" Lester Leith asked at length, without taking his eyes from the view which was framed in the window — a vista of tall, lighted buildings in the foreground, a penthouse apartment, and, far below, a crawling stream of automobiles whose headlights made them seem like a procession of fireflies.

The spy said, "The police think that he changed twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills into twenty-five one-dollar bills."

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Leith slowly turned. His eyes were whimsical. "Rather a good percentage, Scuttle," he said. "A thousand to one. Who'd he shortchange?"

"The police aren't certain. They think it may have been Judge August Peer Mandeville."

Leith frowned. "Isn't he a federal judge, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

Leith glanced at his watch. "Scuttle," he said, "I have twenty-five minutes. Tell me the story briefly, and I'll listen. But mind you, Scuttle, I'm just listening to pass the time. I don't want Sergeant Ackley to think this is another time when I'm outguessing the police, depriving a criminal of his ill-gotten gains, and passing the profits on to the unfortunate."

"I understand, sir . . . Judge Mandeville is presiding over the patent litigation involving the patents of the Click-Fast Shutter Company. A week ago Rodney Alcott approached Mr. Boyen, the president of the Click-Fast Shutter Company and said that for twenty-five thousand dollars Judge Mandeville would give them a favorable decision."

"And how did Alcott fit into the picture, Scuttle?"

"Apparently, he's a close personal friend of Judge Mandeville."

"I see, Scuttle. Go ahead. What happened?"

"You've heard of Charles Betcher, the famous private detective, head of the national agency which —"

"I've heard of him," Leith said.

"Well, it seems that the Click-Fast Shutter Company was suspicious. They thought Alcott might be trying to feather his own nest, or that Judge Mandeville might take the money and fail to give them a favorable decision after all. The shutter company wanted to prove Judge Mandeville had received the money.

"Mr. Boyen called in Charles Betcher and asked his advice. Betcher decided to let Alcott go ahead, but to install detectographs so that every word of his conversation with Judge Mandeville could be taken down on wax cylinders."

Lester Leith slipped a cigarette from the thin, hammered-silver cigarette case which he took from his hip pocket. He tapped the end upon a polished thumbnail and said, "Then they'd let him know they held the records, and own the judge. What happened?"

"They didn't play it that way, sir. That's what they should have done, but the Click-Fast Shutter Company didn't like Judge Mandeville. They decided they'd let him accept the bribe money and then arrest him.

"Betcher took control personally. He came to town, got a suite in a downtown hotel. He and Boyen gave Alcott twenty-five thousand dollars —twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills. They had the numbers on the bills listed, and they didn't let Alcott out of their sight after they gave him the money. He went directly to the judge's chambers, and the detectograph picked up the conversation."

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"Was the judge crooked?" Lester Leith asked.

"No one knows, sir," the spy said. "The detectograph recorded conversation in which Alcott said, 'Okay, Judge, I got the money. I had some difficulty getting them to give it to me, but it's all here.' And then the money was passed over. Alcott came to the door and shook hands with Judge Mandeville. The detectives and police swooped down on Mandeville. They searched him and found a sealed envelope containing twenty-five new one-dollar bills. Mandeville swore this money was the return of a personal loan which he'd made to Alcott."

"And they searched Alcott?" Lester Leith asked.

"Oh, yes, of course, sir."

"And what did they find?"

"Nothing."

"And what does Alcott say?"

"Alcott swears that he gave the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills to Judge Mandeville, that the judge must have smelled a rat and managed to ditch the money."

Lester Leith crossed over to stand above the table, looking down at the newspaper photograph. "I notice Alcott has a bandaged head," he said. "Did he resist arrest?"

"No, sir. That wasn't done by the police, sir. That's the result of an automobile accident."

"I see," Lester Leith said musingly. "Well, it's very interesting, Scuttle. The Click-Fast Shutter Company has paid out twenty-five thousand dollars. The net result has been to antagonize Judge Mandeville, whether he was bribed or not, and probably to have cost them their chance of winning the lawsuit."

The police spy said, "Mr. Boyen, the president of the Click-Fast Shutter Company, is furious. He's offered Mr. Betcher a five-thousand-dollar reward to prove what happened."

Lester Leith raised his eyebrows. "Why Betcher?" he asked.

"He seems to feel that Betcher is the best detective in the country."

Lester Leith smiled. "After his experience," he said, "you must give Mr. Boyen credit for a great amount of blind, loyal faith, Scuttle. I take it Charles Betcher arranged the details of payment."

"That's right, sir."

"Exactly how was the money paid?"

"President Boyen took the money from his pocket, said to Charles Betcher, 'Here are the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills.' Betcher and Boyen together copied the numbers, while Alcott sat on the bed, watching. Then Betcher picked up the money and handed it to Alcott. Alcott folded the bills and started to put them in his pocket. Then he asked for an envelope. He says he didn't even bother to look at the money. He says he watched them copying the numbers from the bills and saw the money then, but that when Betcher handed him the money he just took it for granted it was the same money. *He* says Betcher switched it."

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"And Mandeville didn't count the money?" Leith asked incredulously.

"The money which was given Judge Mandeville was in a sealed envelope," the valet said. "The judge had just torn open the edge of the envelope and taken out the bills when the detectives and police made the raid."

Leith continued to study the sardonically grinning countenance of Rodney Alcott, as depicted in the newspaper. "Any other photographs, of him, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir. The evening paper has a photograph — a snapshot taken by a young lady friend, a Gertrude Pell, with whom he was quite friendly."

Leith frowned at the picture which the spy produced from the late evening edition. "When was *this* taken, Scuttle?" he asked.

"On the afternoon just prior to the call on Judge Mandeville. He and Gertrude Pell were automobile riding, and she took this photograph."

Lester Leith bent over the photograph to study it closely. Abruptly he straightened and looked at his watch. The spy started to say something, but Lester Leith motioned him to silence.

Standing gracefully erect, Lester Leith moved his cigarette in a little series of gestures, as though tracing out the intricate pattern of some jigsaw puzzle. A slow smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Scuttle," he said, "get me a package of linen bandage, a five-yard spool of two-inch adhesive tape, a long string of imitation pearls, half a dozen rings with imitation diamonds, a pair of very dark smoked glasses — the darkest you can buy. And I'll want a white wig, a false mustache — a white walrus mustache — a cane, a crutch, and a white feather — a fluffy, white feather from the breast of a pure white goose."

The spy stared at him with wide, incredulous eyes. "Good heavens, sir!" he exclaimed.

"And I'll want the feather first, Scuttle. I'll need that tonight. Have it put on my dresser in an envelope. I'll be home early — shortly after midnight."

The dazed spy took a pencil and paper from his pocket, scribbled a hurried memo.

"You've got those things written down, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir, but —"

Leith interrupted. "But me no buts, Scuttle. Just get those things — particularly the feather. Without the feather, I can't use any of the other stuff."

"But I don't understand, sir. I —"

Leith silenced him with a gesture. "My time, Scuttle, is up," he said.

Leith started for the door, and the valet rushed to hand him his topcoat, hat, and stick. In the doorway, Leith turned. "The imitation diamond rings, Scuttle," he said, "are for a woman."

"Yes, sir," the spy said. "What sort of a woman, may I ask, sir?"

Lester Leith paused long enough to slit his eyes in thoughtful concen-

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tration. Then he said, almost dreamily, "A woman who knows the world, Scuttle, a woman of around sixty-five with gray hair and twinkling eyes that haven't forgotten how to smile, a woman with a sense of humor, a broad mind, depleted fortunes, and a background of vaudeville or stock-company acting. I want an old trouper. No, no, Scuttle. Don't bother. I'll find her myself."

And Leith stepped out to the elevator, slamming the door behind him.

Sergeant Ackley stared across the table at the undercover man. "That's all of it, Beaver?" he asked.

"That's all of it."

"I don't understand it," Sergeant Ackley said. "There *must* be something more which you haven't told me, Scuttle, something that you've overlooked, something —"

The undercover man scraped back his chair as he jumped to his feet. "Not from you," he shouted. "I won't take it!"

"Won't take what?" Sergeant Ackley said, staring in bewilderment at the undercover man's angry countenance.

"That damn name of Scuttle," the spy roared. "Leith calls me Scuttle because he says I look like a reincarnated pirate. He Scuttles me this and Scuttles me that. I get so damn sick of it —"

"Sit down," Sergeant Ackley said. "That's an order."

Slowly the undercover man sank back in the chair.

Sergeant Ackley said, "We have no time to waste with petty personalities in this department. You're working on a big case. It's a case that's taken altogether too long. We want this man Leith behind the bars. He's outwitted you on a whole string of cases. He's going to outwit you again unless you can give me a better idea of what happened."

The undercover man sighed wearily. "*I'm* the one he's outwitted," he said sullenly.

"Yes, *you*," Sergeant Ackley retorted. "Give me the facts, and I'll put them together, work out a solution, and catch him red-handed, but you're always overlooking something significant."

"Well, I haven't overlooked anything this time," the spy said. "I've given you everything."

Sergeant Ackley puckered his forehead into a frown. "Well," he said slowly, "if you have, there's something about those photographs — wait a minute! I have it!"

"What?" the spy asked.

"The way Alcott is holding that feather," Sergeant Ackley said, his voice quivering with excitement. "Can't you see it, Beaver? The whole thing lies in the way Alcott is holding that feather!"

"What do you mean?"

"Alcott got that dough," Sergeant Ackley said, "and ditched it. He ditched it in some place of concealment where it could be picked up by a confederate. Probably he had a hole in his pocket. He put the money in

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his pocket and stood over a ventilator or in a dark corner of the room, and dropped it. He knew that he'd be searched and arrested, but he figured he could get the newspapers to give him a play if he had a white feather in his wallet, and claimed that it was a lucky talisman.

"Notice what happened. When he was taken to the jail and searched, they found this white feather in his wallet. He begged them to be permitted to keep that white feather with him. Well, the sergeant at the desk was too smart for that. He kept the feather, because it's against the rules to let prisoners keep their personal property in the cells with them, but, of course, he told the newspapers about it, and, of course, the newspapers, wanting some unusual angle of human interest on Alcott, fell for the thing, lock, stock, and barrel.

"The property clerk dug out the feather, and Alcott had his picture taken. Notice the peculiar manner in which he's holding the feather in his thumb and forefinger, with the ring finger bent down, and the middle finger and the little finger sticking up. That's a signal, Beaver."

Beaver bent over the newspaper photcgraphs which Leith had seen, and which were now lying on Sergeant Ackley's table. His manner fell considerably short of enthusiastic assent.

"Of course, that's it," Sergeant Ackley said, gloatingly. "You give me the facts, Beaver, and I'll put them together!"

The undercover man said, "If it's a signal, it's a signal in code, and Leith wouldn't know that code."

"Don't kid yourself," Ackley retorted. "His mind is like greased lightning."

"But I don't think — Well, it didn't look to me as though he'd — It was this *other* picture that got him interested."

"What other one?"

"The one that was taken from a snapshot."

"Oh, *that*," Sergeant Ackley said contemptuously. "That was before Alcott met Charles Betcher to complete arrangements for paying over the money. That picture doesn't mean anything."

The undercover man regarded it in thoughtful concentration.

Sergeant Ackley said, "You have to admit, Beaver, that it was something in the pictures, something Leith saw, something that the others wouldn't see. Now this theory of mine —"

"*Look!*" Beaver exclaimed.

"What?" Sergeant Ackley asked.

"The bandage on the man's head!" Beaver exclaimed.

"What about the bandage?" Sergeant Ackley asked. "He was injured in an automobile accident."

Beaver said, "That bandage is the place where the money is concealed! Don't you get it? He had the twenty-five one-dollar bills planted in his pocket. When they handed him the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills, he simply made an excuse to get his

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hand up near his head and slipped the bills up under the bandage. They searched him, but they didn't think of pulling off that bandage!"

Sergeant Ackley's piggy little eyes glittered with sudden interest. "They may not have searched that bandage at that," he said. "But I don't know what makes you think Leith had any clue to —"

"Don't you see it?" Beaver shouted. "Look at the two photographs. Here's the one that was taken that afternoon. Here's the one that was taken after he was booked. See the bandage? Look at the strips of adhesive tape. See? There are *four* cross strips of adhesive tape on the bandage in the picture taken in the afternoon. There are only *three* in the one taken after he was booked."

Sergeant Ackley stared at the photograph. His eyes became wide and fascinated. "Holy smoke!" he said.

"Get the sketch?" Beaver said excitedly. "Leith is planning on putting up bail and getting Alcott out of jail. He's going to drug him or something, and while Alcott is unconscious, Leith will rip that bandage off. Then he's going to put a new one in its place. Alcott won't even know he's been robbed. It will have that clever, artistic, baffling touch that characterizes all of Leith's crimes."

Sergeant Ackley picked up the telephone. "Get me Captain Carmichael," he said, and a moment later, he said into the transmitter, "Captain, this is Ackley. I've been thinking about that Alcott case, and checking over the newspaper accounts. I noticed there were different photographs in the papers, and in studying those photographs, my eye hit upon a highly significant detail, one that I think has been overlooked. . . . What's that? . . . Yes, Captain. . . . No, it's apparent from the photographs. . . . Yes, Captain. Right away."

Sergeant Ackley hung up the telephone, and said to the undercover man, "Well, that's all, Beaver. As I've told you, you get me the facts, and I'll put them together. I'm going up to have a conference with Captain Carmichael."

Beaver said, "You might mention to Captain Carmichael that I furnished the idea."

Sergeant Ackley stared at him with steady hostility. "*You* furnished the idea!" he said. "Why, you insisted there wasn't any clue. I was the one who kept telling you that it was in those photographs."

"But I did mention the discrepancy between the three strips of adhesive tape in the one picture and the four in the other."

Sergeant Ackley said, "I had noticed that and was debating whether to call your attention to it, Beaver. I pointed out to you that the key clue was contained in those pictures."

"I see. It was all *your* idea."

Sergeant Ackley folded the papers under his arm. "Of course it was my idea," he said.

The valet entered the penthouse apartment to find Lester Leith, his

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head heavily bandaged, engaged in conversation with a gray-haired, rather fleshy woman in the middle sixties.

Lester Leith said to the woman, "Here's my valet now, Mrs. Randerman. His name is Scuttle. You'll find him very efficient. I believe he has another name for purposes of social security. What the devil is it? Woodchuck, Scuttle?"

"No, sir," the spy said, his face flushing angrily.

"Weazel," Lester Leith said. "That's it. This is Mrs. Randerman, who's going to act as my assistant in a business venture. You'll carry out her instructions the same as you would my own, Scuttle."

The spy said, "Yes, sir. And the name's Beaver, sir. B-e-a-v-e-r."

Leith said, "To be sure, Scuttle. Beaver. Why didn't I think of it?"

The spy said to Mrs. Randerman, "I shall consider it a privilege to serve you, madam," and to Lester Leith: "May I ask, sir, what happened to your head?"

Leith raised delicately exploring fingertips to the bandage around his head. "A bit of a bump, Scuttle," he said, "that's all."

"Should I call a doctor, sir?"

"Oh, dear no, Scuttle. It'll be quite all right. I probably didn't need the bandage, but you remember you'd purchased some bandage and adhesive tape."

"Yes, sir."

"I found that they came in handy," Leith said, and then, with a smile for Mrs. Randerman, "Sort of Alice-in-Wonderland affair. My valet buys the bandage and adhesive tape, and an hour later I bump my head. Do you like soda in your Scotch, Mrs. Randerman?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Lots of it," she said.

Leith nodded to the valet. "Two of them, Scuttle," he said.

The spy mixed the drinks.

"Did you," Leith asked him, "get the diamond rings and the pearl necklace, Scuttle?"

"I ordered them, yes, sir."

Leith yawned. "Well," he said, "when they come up, Scuttle, send them back."

The spy almost dropped the bottle he was holding. "Send them back, sir?" he echoed. "You mean that you don't want them?"

"I'd hardly want them if I send them back, would I, Scuttle?"

"No, sir. I guess not, sir, but they're already paid for. I'm afraid I can't return them."

Leith waved his hand in an airy gesture of dismissal. "In that case, Scuttle, we'll take them, of course. Perhaps the janitor would care for them."

"But I don't understand, sir."

"I'm quite sure you don't, Scuttle," Lester Leith said, "and I think Mrs. Randerman could stand just about one more jigger of that Scotch."

"Yes, sir. I — it wasn't anything I did, sir, was it?"

Leith smiled. "On the contrary, Scuttle, it was something I did. I intended to conduct a psychological

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experiment, using the bandage, the pearls, the diamonds, and one or two other bits of equipment, but this bump on the head caused me to use up the bandage. So we'll just forget about the experiment."

"But I can get more bandage, sir," the spy said eagerly.

Leith stretched and yawned. "Oh, I don't think it's necessary, Scuttle," he said. "I've been having so much trouble with Sergeant Ackley lately that I'm afraid he might misunderstand my purpose in conducting the experiment. And watch what you're doing with that soda siphon, Scuttle."

The spy, consumed with curiosity, served the drinks and sought to hover around in the vicinity of the living room where Lester Leith and Mrs. Randerman were discussing the theater, Leith listening with interest to the stories which Mrs. Randerman told of her vaudeville days.

But Leith spiked the valet's guns by saying pointedly, "That's all, Scuttle. We'll ring if we want anything," and the spy had no alternative but to withdraw to his quarters from which he immediately telephoned police headquarters, using the unlisted number through which undercover men were able to communicate directly with Sergeant Ackley.

Nor was Sergeant Ackley's voice any too cordial as he said, "Okay, Beaver. What is it?"

The spy said, "He has the woman all right, a Mrs. Randerman, who was on the vaudeville stage at one time. You'd better look her up. But he's countermanded the order on the imitation pearls and diamonds. He seems to have lost interest in the entire affair — and he's used some of the bandage and adhesive tape to place a bandage around his head. He *says* that he had a bit of a bump."

"Well," Sergeant Ackley growled, "that was one screwy tip you gave me, Beaver. You'd better put a bandage around your own head."

"What do you mean?"

Sergeant Ackley said, "Alcott hadn't hidden any twenty-five thousand dollars in that bandage. That bandage covered a very real wound he had in a very real automobile accident. I passed that tip of yours on to Captain Carmichael, and he became as excited about it as you were. He dashed down to the man's cell and ripped off the bandage, and then found he had to call a doctor to replace it. He told me to tell you not to jump at conclusions next time."

The spy gripped the receiver. "You told Captain Carmichael it was *my* idea?"

Sergeant Ackley said tersely, "It was, wasn't it?"

The spy thought for a minute. "Oh," he said, "if you want to put it that way, I suppose it was."

"It isn't the way I want to put it," Sergeant Ackley said. "I'm trying to get the facts, and I don't like your attitude in trying to pass the buck, Beaver. That's the trouble with the whole department — too many people trying to pass the buck."

"Yes, Sergeant."

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"Now then," Sergeant Ackley barked, "the only chance we stand of breaking this case is to get Lester Leith's brains working on it. Leith will solve the case—and grab the money. We'll grab Leith. It's up to you to see that he doesn't lose interest."

"But he's already lost interest," the spy said.

"Well, get his interest back," the sergeant said. "You may not know it, Beaver, but this is one sweet mess. Judge Mandeville thinks the police department was trying to frame him. The Click-Fast Shutter Company is trying to blame us, and Frank Boyen, their president, turns out to be a close friend of the mayor's. You can see where that leaves us."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"I want to catch Lester Leith," Sergeant Ackley said, "but that's a minor matter compared with locating that twenty-five thousand bucks. If Judge Mandeville took it, we want to know it. We want to pin it on him. If he didn't take it, we want to find out who did."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"I told Captain Carmichael that I'd make it a point to devote my personal attention to the problem. You understand what that means."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"As a matter of fact, Beaver, your activities have been unduly prolonged. It's one sweet mess when you can't find out what's going on under your very nose. I want some action! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Get busy then," Sergeant Ackley said, and banged up the telephone.

The big spy eased the receiver into place. He sat in front of the telephone, his indignant eyes staring at the transmitter. Then, after several seconds of silence, he broke into speech, a low, rumbling monologue in which Sergeant Ackley and his maternal ancestors were described with a wealth of detail.

From time to time, during the afternoon, Lester Leith rang the bell which summoned the spy. With each summons, the spy noticed that the relationship between Mrs. Randerman and Lester Leith seemed to become more cordial as the level of the amber liquid in the bottle diminished. With the third drink, they had started calling each other by their first names. With the fourth drink, Mrs. Randerman's anecdotes of the stage had become more spicy, and by the time Leith escorted Mrs. Randerman to the elevator, they seemed to be friends of long standing.

The spy, shrewdly judging that Leith's expansive mood and the effect of the Scotch would make it advisable to strike while the iron was hot, busied himself in straightening up the living room, removing glasses and cleaning ashtrays. He hoped that Leith would feel sufficiently talkative to give him an excuse for conversation, and his eyes glistened with satisfaction when he noticed that Leith was quite evidently the victim of what under other circumstances,

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would have been described as a "talking jag."

"A very estimable woman, Scuttle," Leith said.

"She is indeed, sir."

"There's nothing like the stage to give a person an interesting background, Scuttle."

"Quite right, sir. I believe you said she was to be a business associate."

Lester Leith shook his head sadly. "It's all off, Scuttle," he said, and his face became so lugubrious that the undercover man, watching him sharply, felt that the man upon whom he spied would, on the slightest provocation, transfer his talking jag into a crying jag — which did not suit the spy's purpose at all.

"I suppose, sir, you're too young to remember vaudeville in its prime."

Leith, his last drink seeming to take cumulative effect, said mournfully, "A milestone in our artistic past, Scuttle, a memory . . . a memory which has become but monument to death of art . . . Shwept aside by . . . flickering miles of mass entertainment . . . movies, Scuttle . . . radio . . . blah — losha blah!"

"Yes, sir."

"Most sad, Scuttle, a sad contemary . . . a sad con — con — contemporary . . . a sad . . . Scuttle, what the devil am I trying to say?"

"A sad commentary, sir?"

"Thash right, Scuttle. Good ole Scuttle, always there in a pinch. Need anything, and you get it. Sad commentary. That's what I wash trying to say, Scuttle."

"Yes, sir. And why aren't you going to use the diamonds and the pearls?" the spy asked, taking advantage of Lester Leith's condition to press his advantage.

Leith shook his head mournfully. "Can't do it, Scuttle. Sergeant Ackley's snooping."

"But Sergeant Ackley wouldn't need to know anything about it."

"Good ole Scuttle! Sentiment reflects upon your intelligence, just as — just as your loyalty reflects upon — No, thash not right. Just as your loyalty — Well, anyhow, Scuttle, just as your concern shows your loyalty."

"Yes, sir. Perhaps you've never taken full advantage of that loyalty, sir."

"Thash right, Scuttle. Perhaps I haven't."

"I notice, sir, that you always play a lone hand. If you'd take me more into your confidence, I could be of even more service to you."

Leith stared at him owlishly. "Thash idea, Scuttle," he said, "but you can't get ahead of old Ackley. He's too smart."

The undercover man said fervently, "I'd like to have your permission, sir, to express my opinion of Sergeant Ackley."

"Go right ahead, Scuttle. Go right ahead," Lester Leith said.

The spy went ahead, with a fervor which left no room for doubting his sincerity, and Lester Leith listened with beaming approval.

"Scuttle," he asked, "did you ever drive mules?"

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"No, sir."

"Never ran a tractor, Scuttle?"

"No, sir."

Leith shook his head sadly. "Ish a gift, Scuttle. I heard a mule skinner once that was almost as good, and they shay tractor men get a pretty good voca — voca — vocabulary, but they can't improve on yours, Scuttle."

"You agree with me, sir?" the spy asked.

Leith said, "I think you're an excellent judge of character, Scuttle. Know'm lika book, Scuttle."

The spy made bold to move closer. "If you could tell me just what you had in mind, sir, I think perhaps I could arrange it."

Lester Leith said owlishly, "Wanted to find out about that man Betcher, Scuttle . . . purty big private detective, Scuttle, but you can't tell about 'im. Somethin' fishy about th' whole business."

The spy said eagerly, "Yes sir. I think you're right, sir."

Leith nodded. "Thank you, Scuttle. Good ole Scuttle. Always stickin' up for me."

"And you intended to use Mrs. Randerman, sir?"

"Thash ri', Scuttle. Thash the idea. Intended to use Miz Randerman. Going to plant her in the hotel, near Besher. Goin' to have her flash losh of diamonds and pearls. I was goin' to put on some false whiskers and be 'er husband, Scuttle. Gonna have a fake burglary and hire Besher to protect the shtuff. Maybe Besher's a crook, Scuttle. You can't tell. Nobody c'n tell who's a crook these days, even the crooks can't tell. Maybe we'd otta start a census of crooks, Scuttle. Get 'em all tabulated . . ."

Leith nodded his head drowsily.

The spy, knowing that he had to work fast, said, "You could go right ahead with that plan, sir, and I think we could find some way of outwitting Sergeant Ackley."

Leith considered the matter with the frowning concentration of one who is having trouble getting his eyes in proper focus. "B'lieve you got somethin' there, Scuttle. Tell you what y'do, Scuttle. We'll make a bet. Thash the idea — make a bet. Nobody can critishize a man for makin' a bet with his valet. Even old sourpuss Ackley couldn't do that, could he, Scuttle?"

"No, sir."

"Thash shwell," Leith said. "We'll make a bet, Shcuttle. I'll bet you fifty dollars I can fix up a crime, and Besher would prove he wash a crook. You bet me fifty dollars he wouldn't. Then you'd go to Sergeant Ackley and ask him if there wash any law against makin' a bet to try and prove a guy was a crook. He'd say, 'No,' and you'd say, 'Put it in writing,' and then we'd have it in writin', right there in good ole black'n white, Scuttle. Somethin' he couldn't wiggle out of . . . Scuttle, there must'a been a li'l too much in that last drink. Ssh too mush — makesh my head feel big, makesh bandashe hurt. Take th' bandashe off, Shuttle."

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"Yes, sir," the spy said, and immediately set about removing the bandage.

A moment later, he said, "I don't see any bump, sir."

Lester Leith laughed. "There washn't any bump, Shuttle. Jus' between you and me, I wash gonna use that bandasze to get that twenty-five — get tha' twenty-five . . ."

As Leith's voice trailed away into silence, the spy said, "Just how were you going to use that to get the twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Leith's eyes suddenly glittered with suspicion. "Did I say anything about twenty-five thousand dollars, Shuttle?"

"No, sir."

"Then don't put words in my mouth. Watch that tongue of yours, Shuttle."

"Yes, sir."

The fit of suspicion passed as quickly as it had arrived. "Thash all ri', Shuttle. Good ole Shuttle. Think I'll lie down for a li'l while, Shuttle."

"Yes, sir. And you want me to get that letter from Sergeant Ackley?"

Leith said, "You couldn't do it, Shuttle."

"I think I could, sir."

"Oh, no, you couldn't, Shuttle. He'sh too schmart. Besides he doesn't like us."

"I know he doesn't like us, sir, but I'm rather ingenious. If you'd only have confidence in me and trust me — I'll tell you what we can do. We could let Sergeant Ackley in on the bet, and then we could let him win. We'd give him twenty-five dollars. Don't you see? Make him a party to it. Then he *couldn't* say anything."

Leith blinked his eyes. "Shuttle," he said, "b'lieve — b'lieve you've got somethin' there."

And Lester Leith's head nodded limply forward.

The big undercover man, his face suffused with triumph, picked up Lester Leith in his arms and carried him gently into the bedroom.

Lester Leith stirred, stretched his arms above his head, and then groaned in agony. He reached out a groping hand, found the call bell by his bedside, and rang for his valet.

The big spy popped into the room with suspicious alacrity. "Good morning, sir," he said.

Leith groaned again. "Good Lord, Scuttle, what happened?"

The spy walked across the room to the heavy drapes, drew them aside and let sunlight stream into the room.

"Don't you remember, sir," he said, "Mrs. Randerman was here, and you — you —"

"Yes, yes," Leith said. "We had some drinks. Then what, Scuttle?"

The spy said tactfully, "You retired early, sir."

"I must have," Leith said. "Where did I dine, Scuttle, at home or . . ."

"You didn't dine, sir."

"Didn't dine?"

"No, sir."

Leith sat up in bed and twisted his face into a wry grimace. The spy

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said, "I have iced tomato juice and Worcestershire sauce for you, sir."

The big undercover operative stepped into the kitchenette, returned with a tall glass in which ice cubes were clicking refreshingly. "If I may suggest it, sir," he said, "you'd get the best results by drinking this all at once."

Leith sighed, and gulped down the contents of the glass. He rolled his head wearily from side to side, and said, "Scuttle, was I drunk?"

"You had been drinking, sir. By the way, sir, I have that letter from Sergeant Ackley."

"What letter?" Leith asked.

"The letter we were talking about," the spy said. "Don't you remember?"

Leith frowned. "I have a hazy recollection, a distorted mirage of a memory. Scuttle, did I talk too much?"

"Not at all, sir. You confided in me, I may say, a little more freely than has heretofore been the case, and I trust you'll have no reason to regret your action."

Leith's features showed anxiety and alarm. "Scuttle, what the devil did I say to you?"

"Nothing that you need regret, sir. You mentioned that you wished to set a trap for Charles Betcher."

"Well, disregard it, Scuttle."

"And," the spy went on, "you suggested that you and I might make a bet, that I could get Sergeant Ackley to take a part of the bet and give us his permission to set a trap."

"Scuttle," Leith said sharply, "are you making that up?"

"Indeed I am not."

Leith said, "Scuttle, I can't imagine myself doing anything so utterly asinine."

"I think it's a good idea, sir, particularly since Sergeant Ackley has walked into the trap."

"He has?"

"Yes, sir. After you retired, and I saw that you wouldn't — Well, that you wouldn't be apt to need me any more, I slipped down to police headquarters."

"But I thought you and Sergeant Ackley were at sword's points."

"We are," the spy said, "but the sergeant has made certain accusations reflecting on my integrity in times past, and I used that as an excuse to call on him. I told him frankly that I intended to sue him for defamation of character."

"And what did he say?"

"He apologized, sir. He said that he had been suspicious of both of us, but that he had come to the conclusion he was wrong. He said that if you wanted to resume your amateur crime dabbling, there would be no objection, just so long as you confined yourself to an academic solution and didn't interfere with the police activities."

Leith said, "Scuttle, I never wanted to solve crimes. I only claimed that frequently valuable clues as to the identity of the criminal were contained in newspaper accounts, and that the police failed to appreciate the significance of certain bits of evidence set forth in the newspapers."

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"Yes, sir. Well, to make a long story short, I told Ackley about our bet, and he said that he would like to come in for half of it. You might care to read this."

The spy handed Lester Leith a page of scrawled handwriting, and Leith read it slowly.

"You'll notice the endorsement at the bottom," the spy said, "in Sergeant Ackley's handwriting. He says, 'I think this is a good bet, and I'll come in on a fifty-fifty basis.' "

Leith suddenly jumped out of bed. "Scuttle," he said, "get Mrs. Randerman on the phone. Tell her to be here inside of an hour. Get me those dark glasses. I want a suit of ready-made clothes with my sleeve and leg measurements, but cut for a stout model. I want those pearls and diamonds — the imitations — and I want that white feather, Scuttle."

"The white feather, sir? I gave it to you yesterday. You put it in your wallet."

"That's right, Scuttle. I'd forgotten."

The spy said ingratiatingly, "Perhaps, sir, since you've seen fit to confide in me to such an extent, you'll tell me what you wanted with the white feather."

"It's a pocket piece," Leith said. "I'm going to carry it in my wallet for luck, Scuttle."

"And the suit, sir?"

Leith said, in a burst of confidence, "We'll have Mrs. Randerman register at Betcher's hotel. Betcher's still there, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

"And has the same suite that he had when he was working with Frank Boyen to set a trap for Judge Mandeville?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's the suite in which Rodney Alcott was given the twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Yes, sir — only he claims it was only twenty-five dollars."

"And as I understand it, Scuttle, Alcott was never out of sight of the detectives after he received that money and until he entered Mandeville's office. Is that right?"

"That's right, sir."

"Do you know how soon they left Betcher's hotel suite after the money was given to Alcott, Scuttle?"

"Right away, sir, although there was just a bit of delay in connection with making certain that the detectograph was properly installed."

"And Alcott was never out of sight of the detectives?"

"No, sir."

Leith said, "Well, Scuttle, we'll have Mrs. Randerman pose as a wealthy woman who wants protection for her jewelry. I'll be her husband. I'll have to disguise myself, of course. I'll use some padding to make me appear heavier and use the false mustache. I think the white walrus mustache will be appropriate."

"Even so, sir, you're a young man, and —"

"I'll make myself up carefully," Leith said, "and I'll let you in on a secret, Scuttle."

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"Yes, sir," the spy said.

"My eyes," Leith said, "are going to be very, very weak. I can't stand any strong light. My interviews with Betcher will be in a darkened room, a room so dark that he will barely have a good look at me. That will keep him from being suspicious. It will also keep him from spotting that the gems are imitations."

The spy said, "By George, it *does* fit in, doesn't it?"

"What, Scuttle?"

"All of those things you wanted."

"Of course they fit in," Leith said.

"I'll get busy right away, sir."

Leith sat down on the edge of the bed. "I wonder," he said, "if I could get along as a fat man." He stripped off his pajamas, rolled them into a ball, and placed them against his stomach.

"Too lumpy, sir," the spy said.

Leith nodded. He took a pillow from the bed, held it up against his front. "How's that, Scuttle?"

"Better, sir."

Leith said, "Is there more of that adhesive tape in the place, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

Leith said, "We'll tape this pillow to my stomach. No, never mind, Scuttle. I'll hold it in place with my hands. You can take my waist measurement and my chest measurement. Get a tape measure and measure me for that suit."

The spy started for the door of the bedroom with alacrity. "You're never going to regret this, sir," he said.

Leith, still holding the pillow against his middle, said, "I'm quite sure I won't, Scuttle. And don't forget the cane, the crutch, the mustache, and the wig."

Lester Leith, standing in front of the mirror, said, "How do I look, Scuttle?"

The spy surveyed the portly form which seemed so incongruous with the finely-chiseled features of Lester Leith. The walrus mustache and the dark-lensed glasses furnished an added touch of the bizarre.

"Very nice, sir, and considering the manner in which we purchased the suit, it fits you very nicely, sir."

Leith nodded. "Now," he said, "if you'll get a taxicab, I'll join Mrs. Randerman in Betcher's hotel, and we'll see just how good a detective he is."

"Yes, sir," the spy said, and moved over to pick up the telephone.

A taxi took Lester Leith to the hotel where Mrs. Randerman had already registered. Leith was escorted by a bellboy to the suite which she had reserved for herself and husband.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," she said.

Leith took the cane which she handed him, sat down in an easy chair, adjusted his dark glasses and the false mustache. She said, "I think a little greasepaint would put some lines in your face. Permit me."

With the deft skill of one who has studied the art of make-up, she etched wrinkles in the contours of his face.

When she had finished, she stepped

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back and eyed her work with approval. "Not so bad," she said. "You'll get by in a darkened room."

"Under those circumstances," Leith observed, "let's darken the room."

She drew the heavy drapes across the windows and switched out the electric lights.

Leith said, "Now, go ahead and call him."

She stepped to the telephone and said, "I'd like to communicate with Charles Betcher, please. This is Mrs. Randerman in 409."

She hung up the telephone and waited. A few minutes later, when the bell shattered the silence, she picked up the receiver and said, "Yes? . . . Oh, Mr. Betcher, this is Mrs. Randerman. I'm in 409 in the hotel. I understood that you were staying here. In fact, that's one of the reasons I picked this hotel. My husband is neurotic. He's going blind. He's crippled with arthritis, and is commencing to get complexes of persecution. Recently he's become obsessed with the idea that someone is going to steal my jewelry. I've tried to assure him that it's all foolishness, but . . . What's that? . . . A doctor? Oh, but you don't understand, Mr. Betcher. I've already seen the doctor, and the doctor suggested that I get in touch with you. The doctor says that we should humor him as much as possible. . . . That's very kind of you, Mr. Betcher. We'd be willing to pay a very substantial fee if you would just drop in for a consultation and assure us that you'll put men on the job. You won't need to do it, of course, just promise.

"You see, my husband is in rather a peculiar mental condition. His appearance is somewhat unusual, and whenever anyone turns to look at him, he thinks that it's a gem thief shadowing us to find the best method of getting my jewels. Now, if you could assure him that you were going to protect us, then whenever anyone turned to look at him on the street, I could tell him that it was one of your operatives, a detective who was keeping us under surveillance so that no crook could get near us. . . . That will be very kind of you. . . . Could you come right away please? . . . Thank you. . . . I will be most generous."

She hung up the phone and said to Lester Leith, "Okay, he's coming."

Leith said, "All right. Switch on the lights. I'll go in the bedroom. Remember your lines."

She turned to stare at him sharply. "Look here," she said. "This isn't illegal, is it?"

Leith smiled. "Not if you do *exactly* as I tell you," he said, "and don't ask any questions. In that way, the responsibility rests wholly on my shoulders."

She said, "Okay, get in that bedroom."

A few moments later Charles Betcher, a portly, dignified man who had cultivated an air of pompous infallibility, knocked on the door. Mrs. Randerman admitted him.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came per-

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sonally, Mr. Betcher. You don't know what it's going to mean to me. My husband, of course, has heard of your reputation. He thinks that aside from Sherlock Holmes you're the greatest detective who ever lived."

Betcher cleared his throat. "Sherlock Holmes," he said, "lacked many of the qualities of a great detective. However, we'll let it pass, madam. It is a pleasure to me to be of service."

"Come in and sit down," she invited.

Betcher strutted pompously across the room and settled his bulk into the most comfortable chair. His eyes drifted to Mrs. Randerman's fingers. "I see that you believe in wearing your jewelry," he said.

"Oh yes," she replied. Then she laughed and said, "I don't care a thing in the world about the jewelry. It's an ornament. Of course, it's valuable, but I see no reason why a person should ruin her pleasure worrying over her valuables."

"Very commendable," Betcher said.

"I think you understand about my husband," Mrs. Randerman said.

"I am familiar with that type of psychosis. My work as a detective involves a knowledge of medical jurisprudence."

Mrs. Randerman said impulsively, "How interesting it must be — how exciting!"

Betcher nodded, slipped a cigar from his pocket, cut off the end, and crossed his legs. "How much service," he asked, "do you want?"

"I don't want you to do a thing about the stones," she said, "just allay my husband's nervousness."

Betcher said, "I take it, you want to use my name?"

"Yes."

Betcher cleared his throat. "Experience has shown that when crooks learn I am protecting a client, the possibility of theft is greatly decreased. We would, of course, have to take that into consideration in fixing the er — er — remuneration."

"I should expect to," Mrs. Randerman said.

Betcher regarded her in studious contemplation. "What," he asked, "are your gems worth?"

Mrs. Randerman patted her hair with her fingers. The imitation stones glittered into dazzling streaks of blurred light. "Oh," she said airily, "not a great deal — that is, it wouldn't make a great deal of financial difference if we should lose them, but it's what they stand for. They've become an obsession with Mr. Randerman."

Betcher said, "Are there just your rings?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I have quite a few other jewels. For instance, there's this."

She reached into the table drawer, took out a jewel case, and from it held up a long rope of pearls.

Betcher showed that he was properly impressed. He started forward to inspect the jewels.

Mrs. Randerman coughed.

From the bedroom of the suite came the sound of a crutch and cane, pounding on the floor, and a petulant

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cry of, "Irene. Irene. Where the devil are you, Irene?"

"Oh," she said, "that's my husband. He's just wakened. You'll pardon me if I draw all the drapes and switch out the light. He's just recovering from a very severe eye ailment, and can't stand any light whatever. Just a minute, Lester. I'm coming."

Mrs. Randerman fairly flew around the room, drawing the drapes, pulling the curtains, switching off the lights, until the afternoon sunlight, filtering through the drapes, became only a vague twilight which showed the outlines of objects in the room, but gave no opportunity for an inspection in detail.

Betcher, who had moved over toward the jewel case, thought better of it and returned to his chair. Irene Randerman moved quickly to the door of the bedroom.

"Where are you, Irene?" Lester Leith demanded in a high, cracked voice. "Who the devil are you talking with? I hate salesmen. You know that. Tell him we don't want any."

Mrs. Randerman's voice was soothing. "It isn't a salesman, dear. It's a detective who's going to protect our property — the best detective in the business."

Lester Leith said, "To the devil with all detectives. They're crooks. There isn't any one of them that's worth a button outside of Charles Betcher. Charles Betcher and Sherlock Holmes were the two greatest detectives who ever lived."

"Hush, dear," Mrs. Randerman said, in a low voice. "It's Betcher himself."

Lester Leith's voice registered a respect which was akin to reverence. "Betcher himself!" he said in a half-whisper.

"Yes."

"Let me meet him. Let me shake hands with him," Leith said, and the sound of his cane and crutch on the floor beat a tattoo of sound as he came hobbling through the doorway into the darkened room. "Where are you, Betcher?" he called. "Where are you? I want to shake you by the hand."

"Here I am," Betcher said, smiling affably and arising to stand by his chair.

Leith groped his way toward the sound of the voice. Mrs. Randerman, placing the tips of her fingers on his shoulders, guided him through the darkened room.

Betcher had a vague glimpse of a man bent with age and with arthritis, of a drawn, haggard face, a body which had far too much bloated weight around the waistline, a drooping, gray, walrus mustache, a shock of gray hair, and eyes that were completely concealed behind opaque lenses.

"Where are you?" Leith asked. "I can't see clearly — those confounded eyes of mine. Want to shake hands with the greatest detective since Sherlock Holmes."

Mrs. Randerman said warningly, "Not too hard, please. The bones in his hands are affected."

Betcher placed his hand in Lester

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Leith's, squeezed the fingers gently. "Glad to meet you," he said.

Mrs. Randerman guided Leith's bent figure over to a comfortable chair, eased him down into the cushions, and said, "Now sit there, dear, and don't try to move. You know it hurts you when you move."

Leith said, "What's Betcher want to see us about?"

She said, "I sent for him. I want to hire him to protect my jewelry."

"Protect your jewelry — what for?"

"So it won't be stolen, silly, and so you won't worry about it."

"I don't give a hoot about the jewels," Lester Leith said. "I worry about thieves. I don't want thieves snooping around here. My eyes are bad. I can't see people. Living in the dark that way, you don't want to think you're in a room where a thief may sneak up behind you."

Betcher said, "I have undertaken the job of safeguarding your jewels, and I doubt if you will be troubled by any thieves."

"That's fine," Leith admitted. "How much do you want?"

Betcher said, "The service is rather unusual. I wouldn't know just how to go about fixing a price. It would depend somewhat on . . ."

"How much?" Lester Leith interrupted in his cracked, shrill voice.

Betcher said, "Taking into consideration the value of the jewelry and . . ."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars!" Betcher snapped. "Cash on the nail."

Leith, still keeping his high, cracked voice, said, "That's the way I like to have a man talk. No beating around the bush. Straight out. Businesslike. We'll talk it over. We'll let you know in half an hour."

Betcher said, with dignity, "I am not at all anxious to undertake the employment. I have all the work I can do. You'll remember that the suggestion I handle this matter came from you, Mrs. Randerman."

Leith said, "Don't be a pantywaist, Betcher. You're in business for money. A thousand dollars is a lot of money. I don't care how much business you have. If you had a thousand dollars extra, it would be nice gravy."

Betcher said to Mrs. Randerman, "There will be details to discuss in the event you decide to meet my terms."

"You bet there will," Leith said. "When we pay a thousand dollars, we're going to know what we're getting."

"Now, dear," Mrs. Randerman said. "Don't get nervous about it. Mr. Betcher is quite right."

"Of course he's right," Leith said. "He's a good detective. Best detective since Sherlock Holmes. That doesn't mean that *I'm* a fool. He's too inclined to beat around the bush. He'll have to get over that if he's going to do business with us."

Betcher seemed glad of the opportunity to beat a retreat. "When," he asked Mrs. Randerman, "will you let me know?"

"Sometime within half an hour?"

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Betcher nodded. "That will be satisfactory."

"You'll be in your room?" she inquired in a low voice.

"Yes," he said.

Leith pounded on the floor with his crutch. "Don't go to him," he said. "Make him come to us. What's getting into you, Irene? You're doing the buying. You —"

"I think you had better go now," Mrs. Randerman said in a low, confidential voice to the detective.

Betcher nodded and slipped quietly out into the corridor.

"How did I do?" Mrs. Randerman asked Lester Leith when the door closed.

"Fine," Leith said.

Charles Betcher returned to his suite to find a telephone call from Frank Boyen, President of the Click-Fast Shutter Company.

The conversation which took place over the telephone was not particularly conducive to peace of mind on the part of the detective. Frank Boyen, approached by a man who claimed to have the ear of Judge Mandeville, and who was asking twenty-five thousand dollars for a favorable verdict in the patent litigation, had approached Betcher for advice. Betcher had suggested setting a trap. In the event Mandeville took the money, Boyen, having proof of the bribery, would be in a position to write his own ticket. In the event it was a swindle, Alcott could be placed behind bars.

The net result of Betcher's activities had been to cost the Click-Fast Shutter Company twenty-five thousand dollars which had disappeared into thin air, to antagonize Judge Mandeville, and to make the management of the corporation the laughing-stock of its competitors and the focal point of a white-hot indignation on the part of its stockholders.

Betcher terminated the conversation as quickly as possible. He assured Boyen that he was "working on the case" and "making progress," that he expected a "satisfactory termination within a very short time — possibly a matter of hours."

He hung up the telephone and mopped his forehead. The afternoon was not particularly auspicious for Charles Betcher.

He was just about to pour himself a good stiff drink when the telephone rang again. He answered it, and heard Mrs. Randerman's voice on the line. She said, "My husband has insisted on seeing you privately. I'm going to bring him down the corridor as far as the door. Please draw the curtains and make the room as dark as possible."

"But, my dear Mrs. Randerman," Betcher said, "I have nothing whatever to discuss with your husband."

"He's coming down," she said, "bringing you a check. Goodbye."

Betcher considered that last remark. A check for one thousand dollars involving no outlay of time or energy on his part was well worthwhile. If Mrs. Randerman wanted to

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pay him a thousand dollars merely to ease the strain on her husband's nerves, it was quite all right with Charles Betcher.

He moved swiftly about the room, pulling drapes into position, lowering shades, switching out lights, making the room as dark as possible.

He heard the hobbledy-bang, hobbledy-bang of Leith's crutch and cane in the corridor, and then there was a tap on the door.

Betcher put on his most affable smile. He opened the door, bowed suavely to Mrs. Randerman, and stood deferentially to one side as she piloted the bent figure into the room.

Mrs. Randerman said, "We've decided to accept your prop—"

"Not so fast! Not so fast!" Leith stormed in his high-pitched, cracked voice. "There are some questions I want to ask first."

Mrs. Randerman said, "Can't you understand, dear? Mr. Betcher is a busy man. All you need to do is give him the check, and he'll give us the protection. You won't be bothered any more seeing thieves who shadow us. Instead you'll see Mr. Betcher's operatives who will be constantly on the job. Won't they, Mr. Betcher?"

She closed her eye in a quick wink, and Charles Betcher said, with dignity, "When I undertake a job, I do it to the best of my ability. I have a wide, far-flung organization, Mr. Randerman. I—"

"No need to go into that," Leith said. "If you weren't the best detective since Sherlock Holmes, we wouldn't consider employing you."

Betcher said, with dignity, "Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character, Mr. Randerman. While his creator kindly allowed him to bring his fictional cases to a satisfactory solution, Sherlock Holmes would never have been able to handle the problems which confront me—almost as a matter of daily routine."

Leith chuckled, and the chuckle was sardonic. "Bet he wouldn't have got taken in on that Click-Fast Shutter deal," he said.

Betcher gave an exclamation of annoyance.

Mrs. Randerman said, "Now, now, dear. Just hand him the check, and—"

Leith said to her, "What are you doing here? I thought you'd gone back."

"No, dear. I'm waiting to take you back."

Leith pounded with his crutch. "Didn't you leave the door of the room open and unlocked?"

Mrs. Randerman gave a gasp of dismay. "My heavens!" she said.

She jumped to her feet and raced down the corridor.

Leith turned his head in the general direction of Charles Betcher. "Where are you?" he asked. "I can't see you."

"Here," Betcher said.

Leith said, "I wanted to get rid of her. I have a business proposition to make."

"What is it?"

Leith said, "She controls the purse

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strings. She won't let me have money for whiskey — claims drinking isn't good for me. I have to chisel a little bit. I'm not a fool. I know that she's giving you this dough, and that it's all gravy for you. You won't do anything except put a little glass sign on the door stating that the premises are protected by the Charles Betcher Detective Agency, Inc. Now then, how about a kickback?"

"Why, what do you mean?" Betcher asked.

"You know what I mean," Leith said. "Here's a check for a thousand dollars, signed by the wife. It's payable to you. I give it to you. It's gravy. You slip me five hundred bucks on the q.t. Everybody's satisfied."

Betcher said indignantly, "I'll be a party to no such contemptible proceedings."

"Well," Leith said, "we might make a different division. I'll be fair. You give me two hundred and fifty, and you keep seven fifty."

Betcher said, "Mr. Randerman, I am going to repeat this conversation to your wife."

"No, you aren't," Leith cackled, in his high, shrill voice. "I'll call you a liar. She wouldn't believe it."

Betcher said, "If she has given you a check for me, Mr. Randerman, pass it over. I'll give you a receipt and take over the responsiblity of your jewels. You can —"

He was interrupted by the sound of running steps in the corridor. Mrs. Randerman flung herself against the door, beating on the panels with her fists. "Quick! Come, quick!" she cried. "We've been robbed."

Betcher crossed the room in four swift strides, jerked open the door.

"Come, quick!" Mrs. Randerman said. "They must have gone in through the door. They can't have got far. Oh, my jewels! Come!"

She turned and ran back down the corridor. For a moment Betcher hesitated then started to run after her.

Leith called out in his high, shrill voice, "Don't be a fool —"

The banging of the door cut off the rest of the sentence.

Betcher followed Mrs. Randerman down to her suite. The door was still ajar.

"Where were the gems?" he asked.

"Right here in this jewel box."

"In the table drawer?"

"Yes."

"Did you leave the door open and unlocked?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"Who else knew that you kept them there?"

"No one," she said, "except my husband — and perhaps the maid."

Betcher said, "We'll check up on the maid right away."

He stepped to the telephone and asked the operator to connect him with the manager's office. Then he said, in a gravely professional tone, "This is Betcher, the detective. One of my clients has suffered a loss here in the hotel. I'm very anxious to handle the matter quickly, efficiently, and without undue publicity so far as the

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hotel is concerned. Find the maid and the housekeeper who have this room on their list, and bring them to 409 at once. Don't ring the house detective in on it. I don't like house detectives. I can't work with them."

He hung up and turned to Mrs. Randerman.

"Now, then," he said, "we want to keep that jewel box in a safe place. It probably contains fingerprints. I'll have one of my fingerprint experts check them. Then we'll get the fingerprints of the maid and the housekeeper, and — What's this? It must be your husband."

Mrs. Randerman said, "Oh, the poor man. The light will hurt his eyes."

She rushed to the light switch, clicked off the lights, and said to the detective, "Pull down the curtain and draw the drapes. I'll guide him in here."

She ran down the corridor, and a moment later Leith stood in the doorway.

He hobbled into the room, muttering in an angry undertone. He walked across to the jewel case, shifted his cane from his left hand to his right hand, and fished in the side pocket of his coat. Abruptly he brought out a long string of pearls which he dropped into the jewel case.

"There they are," he said.

Mrs. Randerman stared at him, speechless with surprise.

Betcher said, "What the devil's the meaning of this?"

Leith raised his voice until it was a shrill scream of cackling accusation. "It means that you're a fool," he said. "You're a poor excuse for a detective. I wouldn't employ you to guard anything. I took those pearls with me because I wanted you to look them over. Personally, I don't think they're genuine. I wasn't going to pay a thousand dollars to protect a lot of phoney jewelry. My own idea is, my wife has pawned the originals and has taken advantage of my poor eyesight to substitute imitations. I won't stand for it. I kept yelling at you that I had the necklace, but you wouldn't listen. You were in too much of a hurry to go banging down the corridor. Now I suppose you've accused the maid and the chambermaid and will get me in a damage suit."

Lester Leith whipped a tinted oblong of paper from his pocket and tore it into fragments. "Bosh," he said, "I wouldn't give you a thousand cents let alone a thousand dollars. You're fired!"

Betcher drew himself up with dignity. "Permit me to observe," he said, "that I wouldn't work for clients whose mentality seems to be so eccentric, whose chiseling tactics are worse than those of the cheapest crook, and whose personality is distasteful to me. In short, Mr. Randerman, I have the honor to wish you a very good afternoon, and to congratulate myself upon having escaped the burden of having you as a client."

Mrs. Randerman said, "Dear, you've hurt his feelings."

"Hurt his feelings!" Lester Leith

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cackled. "I suppose now I'll have to give fifty dollars apiece to the maid and housekeeper to square the beef with them. No wonder he cost the Click-Fast Shutter Company twenty-five thousand bucks! Greatest detective since Sherlock Holmes — *Bah!*"

The doorman at Lester Leith's apartment house stared as Mrs. Randerman, alighting from a taxicab, turned to assist a bent figure attired in a white wig, a drooping walrus mustache and a bulging suit of ready-made clothes. The old man's eyes were shielded from the light by very big dark glasses, the lenses larger than silver dollars, bordered with thick rims of white celluloid.

The two police detectives who had been shadowing the taxicab parked their car some twenty feet behind, and one of them, moving with crisp, businesslike efficiency, jumped to the curb and so timed his movements that he rode up in the same elevator which whisked Lester Leith to the floor of his penthouse apartment.

Mrs. Randerman fitted the latch-key which Leith handed her and then turned to confront the detective standing behind her. "What do you want?" she asked, her voice sharp with suspicion.

The detective said sharply, "Building inspector. A couple of fuses have blown in this apartment, and I think the wiring's defective."

"Well, *I* don't," Mrs. Randerman said. "I don't think the owner of the apartment would care to be disturbed at this time."

"I'm coming in anyway," the detective said, pushing forward past Mrs. Randerman as the bent, white-haired figure opened the door.

Beaver, the undercover man, was waiting in the reception hallway. He flashed a quick warning wink to the detective who was posing as a building inspector.

Mrs. Randerman said to Leith, "This man insists on inspecting the wiring, Mr. Leith. I told him I didn't think —"

"It's all right," Leith said dejectedly. He straightened his bent figure, dropped the crutch, threw the cane from him petulantly, ripped off the wig, dropped it to the floor, jerked off the smoked glasses and the walrus mustache. "Well, Scuttle," he said, "I was wrong."

"Wrong, sir?"

"Yes. It's once I made a mistake. The man's honest — hopelessly, stupidly honest."

Leith raised his vest, loosened his belt, pulled out a pillow, and tossed it to the spy. "Put this back in my bedroom," he said. "Lay out a gray suit, give these clothes to the Salvation Army. You may as well keep the imitation jewels, Mrs. Randerman. They might come in handy."

The spy said, "Yes, sir." He stooped to pick up the wig and the dark glasses, and said to the police detective, pointedly, "I think you'd better come back at another time, if you don't mind. I can handle everything

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now — that is, if there's anything wrong with the wiring."

Lester Leith, the loose folds of the ready-made suit bagging about his well-knit figure, said, "Oh, let him inspect, Scuttle. Mrs. Randerman and I want a Scotch and soda."

Leith walked into the living room, held a chair for Mrs. Randerman, then dropped dejectedly into his favorite reclining chair.

The police detective and the undercover man held a hurried, whispered conversation. Then the detective eased himself through the door, to report to Sergeant Ackley that Leith had been shadowed to the very door of his apartment.

Beaver took the pillow and articles of disguise into the bedroom, secured ice cubes from the refrigerator, wheeled the portable bar into the living room, and regarded Leith's lugubrious countenance with shrewd, glittering eyes.

Leith said, "Use the tallest glasses you have, Scuttle."

"Yes, sir. Your trip a failure, sir?"

Leith said, "Yes. My deductions were absolutely wrong, Scuttle. I felt certain that Betcher had switched the bills just as he handed them to Alcott."

"Now you've changed your mind?" the spy asked.

"Definitely, Scuttle. I set a trap for Betcher. If he'd been inclined to chisel, he'd have given me a kickback on Mrs. Randerman's check. He didn't do it. The man's honest, I tell you. Stupid, opinionated, conceited, overrated, egotistical — but honest, blast him!"

"Yes, sir," the spy said. "Of course that's only one possibility, sir."

Leith said testily, "Well, we won't discuss it now, Scuttle. Get those drinks ready."

Leith opened his wallet and took out a sheaf of fifty-dollar bills. He passed them over to Mrs. Randerman. "Here you are," he said, "one thousand dollars in fifties."

She said, "Really, Mr. Leith, I feel guilty taking this money. It's a gross overpayment, particularly since you —"

"That's all right," Leith said, leaning across to drop the money into her lap. "The money means very little to me. I'm chagrined to think that I was so wrong. Well, I'll drink your health, Mrs. Randerman, and then you can be on your way, and Beaver will help me get rid of this abominable suit."

Fifteen minutes later, when Mrs. Randerman had left, Leith again took his wallet from his pocket. "Well, Beaver," he said, "I owe you fifty dollars."

The spy said, virtuously, "Oh, now, sir, that bet was just for the purpose of trapping Sergeant Ackley. You can give me the twenty-five dollars which is his share of the bet and —"

"No, no, Scuttle. It was a bet, and when I lose a bet I pay off."

He handed the spy fifty dollars, and as he took the fifty-dollar bill from his wallet, a limp, bedraggled white feather fell out into his hand.

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Leith looked at it and laughed sardonically.

The spy said, "That feather doesn't seem to have brought you any luck, sir."

"It hasn't," Leith said.

"May I ask why you wanted it?" the spy inquired.

Leith said, dejectedly, "Oh, that was just a second string to my bow, Scuttle."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Leith's voice was flat with disinterest. "You see, Scuttle," he explained patiently, "there were three possibilities. Either Betcher was crooked, Alcott was crooked, or Judge Mandeville actually took the bribe. Because of the crude manner in which the thing was handled, I was very much inclined to give Mandeville a clean bill of health. If he'd wanted a bribe, he'd have gone about it in a more skillful manner. After all, you know, he has a trained legal mind. I picked Betcher as being the more likely suspect. I was wrong. The feather proves it. If I'd only taken the trouble to look at this feather early this afternoon, I'd have saved myself a lot of work and a humiliating experience."

The spy stared at the feather. "I don't see how you reach that conclusion, sir."

Leith said wearily, "It's simple, Scuttle. The feather which Alcott was holding up in that newspaper photograph was nice and fluffy. This feather has been pressed together, is worn and bedraggled. Yet it's been in my wallet less than twenty-four hours. Alcott *claimed* he'd been carrying that feather *for more than a year*. I carry my wallet in my hip pocket, but even if Alcott had his wallet in his breast pocket, within a week at the most that feather would have been pressed flat, the edges would have been worn, and it would have had this same bedraggled appearance."

The spy's eyes glittered with sudden understanding. "Perhaps," he said, "they're *both* crooked."

Leith shook his head sadly. "No, Scuttle. Betcher's on the square. He's too stupid to be otherwise. Good heavens, Scuttle, I gave him a dozen chances to pick flaws in my story. Among other things, I pretended that I couldn't see, and yet I called Mrs. Randerman's attention to the fact that she'd left the bedroom door open. I complained about having people stare at me on the street, and yet I said I couldn't stand bright light in my eyes. . . . No, Scuttle, Betcher is a stuffed shirt, vastly overrated, a pompous, stupid individual who has achieved some measure of success, not because of his own ability, but because of the ability of men whom he has employed. He tried to handle this bribe business personally and Alcott could have swindled him right under his eyes."

The spy's hand quivered with excitement as he took the white feather. "But," he said, "knowing that Alcott is the real crook and with this feather as a clue, you could —"

"No, Scuttle," Leith said, "I'm finished. I made a fool of myself. I'm

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getting as dumb as Sergeant Ackley. Come on, Scuttle, let's get this suit off and you can bundle it up and send it to the Salvation Army. . . . Am I dining out tonight, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Van Peltman, sir. At eight. You promised to —"

"Ring her up," Leith said, "and tell her I'm indisposed. Convey my regrets."

"Yes, sir," the spy said. "But this white feather —"

"Don't mention it to me again," Leith said irritably. "I don't want to hear anything more about the case, Scuttle. I'll go in and get these clothes off and get into a shower. You'd better put through that telephone call about the dinner before you forget it."

"Yes, sir," the spy said, and vanished with alacrity into the booth.

But the first call which he put through was not to Mrs. Van Peltman, nor was it to Sergeant Ackley. It was a call put through directly to Captain Carmichael.

When the spy had Carmichael on the phone, he said, "I beg your pardon for calling you direct, Captain, but this is Beaver, the undercover operative working under Ackley."

"Oh yes, Beaver," Captain Carmichael said. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I understood that you'd been advised I had a wrong idea on that Alcott case."

Carmichael said, "I was placed in rather an embarrassing position, Beaver. That bandage business —"

The spy made so bold as to interrupt. "Pardon me, Captain," he said, "but I think sometimes Sergeant Ackley gets things confused. I thought I'd call you direct so as to eliminate the possibility of any misunderstanding. What I was telling Sergeant Ackley was that I thought the feather Alcott was holding in that newspaper picture was a most significant clue."

Captain Carmichael said, "The feather, Beaver?"

"Yes, Captain."

"What the devil kind of a clue would that be? What does it signify?" Carmichael asked.

"Don't you see, Captain?" Beaver said. "Alcott says that feather is a pocket piece, one that he's carried in his wallet for some time. As a matter of fact, the newspaper photograph itself proves that he's a liar. That feather is all fluffy and in perfect condition. You'll find that if you carry one of those light, downy feathers in your wallet for no longer than twenty-four hours, it will commence to look rough and frayed and —"

"By George," Captain Carmichael interrupted, "you have something there, Beaver!"

"I thought so," the spy said modestly. "I tried to explain it to Sergeant Ackley, but the sergeant occasionally jumps at conclusions. I think he had some idea about that bandaged head, and he naturally thought that anything I was trying to tell him had something to do with that."

Captain Carmichael said, "I'm glad you called me direct, Beaver. You did quite right. That's a most

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valuable clue. I should have had my wits about me. It's obvious that feather couldn't have been carried in the man's wallet for any length of time. That's very good work, Beaver, very good reasoning."

The spy grinned as he eased the telephone receiver back into its cradle.

Down in an isolated cell at the city jail two husky detectives peeled off their coats, neatly folded them, and placed them over the back of the chair. They took off their shirts and ties.

Rodney Alcott, seated at the far end of the cell, watched them with apprehensive eyes. "What are they going to do?" he asked Captain Carmichael.

Captain Carmichael said grimly, "How about that feather?"

"What about it?"

Carmichael said, "You claim you had been carrying that for more than a year as a lucky piece."

"That's right," Alcott said.

Captain Carmichael laughed sardonically. "When you carry a feather in a wallet for even twenty-four hours, it looks all bedraggled. The feather you had looked as though it had just been plucked out of a goose. All right, boys, get started."

Captain Carmichael turned toward the cell door.

One of the big plainclothes men spat suggestively on his hands, and approached Alcott, his eyes glittering in anticipation.

Alcott screamed, "Don't go, Captain! Don't go! I'll come clean!"

Captain Carmichael turned. "Well," he said, "it's about time. Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"Because I thought I could get away with it," Alcott sobbed, "but now that you're wise to that feather, I'll tell you all about it . . ."

Lester Leith, enjoying the luxury of a lazy evening at home, looked up from the magazine he was reading as the buzzer sounded an imperative signal. "Better see who it is, Scuttle," he said.

The spy opened the door. Sergeant Ackley, accompanied by Captain Carmichael and two detectives, pushed their way through the door.

Carmichael said, "All right, Sergeant. You do the talking."

Sergeant Ackley pounded his way across the room.

Lester Leith arched his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Why, good evening, gentlemen," he said. "What brings you here, and why the officious manner, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Ackley said, "You know very well what I'm after, Leith."

Leith shook his head. "I'm not much of a mind-reader, Sergeant," he said.

Ackley said, "We've been working on Rodney Alcott. He broke down and confessed the whole deal."

"Indeed," Leith said. "What did he say?"

"He's a chiseler and an opportunist," Sergeant Ackley said. "He

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thought there was an opportunity to shake down Frank Boyen for twenty-five thousand dollars. By capitalizing on a family connection Alcott had been able to be seen in public once or twice with Judge Mandeville. He took occasion to see that Frank Boyen, the president of the Click-Fast Shutter Company, knew of his contact with Judge Mandeville. Then he approached Boyen and tried to get twenty-five thousand dollars which he supposedly was going to pass on to Judge Mandeville.

"Boyen smelled a rat and called in Betcher, the private detective. Betcher also smelled a rat. They intended to give Alcott the money and find out what he did with it. If he went south with it, they were going to arrest him. If he passed it over to Judge Mandeville, they were going to arrest both of them."

Leith said, "I have read the papers, Sergeant, and am familiar with the superficial facts. Do I understand that you have called on me this evening to ask me to collaborate with you?"

Sergeant Ackley gave an impatient exclamation. "You know why I've called," he said. "You doped it all out."

"Doped what all out?"

"What happened," Sergeant Ackley said.

"Indeed, no," Leith observed. "I'd be interested to know what did happen."

"As though you didn't know," Ackley said. "I tell you Alcott has confessed. They took him into Betcher's suite in the hotel. He was given the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills there, and he knew, of course, they'd keep him under surveillance until he had gone to Judge Mandeville's chambers. But Alcott's pretty slick. He managed to get one of the pieces of adhesive tape off of the bandage on his head. He was sitting on the bed in Betcher's suite at the time. He got his knife out of his pocket. While they were checking and listing the numbers on the bills, he pushed back the end of the pillowcase and cut a small slit in the end of the pillow. When they handed him the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills, he took them with his right hand, folded them, and then surreptitiously slipped them into his left hand. He had already planted twenty-five one-dollar bills in his left coat sleeve. He managed to substitute those bills and then put them ostentatiously in his pocket. He shoved the twenty-five one-thousand-dollar bills into the opening in the pillow, put the piece of adhesive tape over the cut in the pillow, and pulled back the pillowslip. He intended to watch his opportunity, return, and pick up the twenty-five thousand dollars.

"The thing that betrayed him was a white feather from the inside of the pillow. In pulling the adhesive tape from his bandage, he got some of the adhesive stuck to his fingers. That caused one of the white feathers from the inside of the pillow to stick to his fingers and get folded in with the one-dollar bills. Later on, when the one-

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dollar bills were found in his wallet, the white feather was among them. He knew that he had to think fast and explain away that feather. Otherwise, it would furnish a clue to the entire business. So he handed out a cock-and-bull story about it being a lucky piece that he had carried for some time."

Leith's eyes showed interest.

"That's very interesting, Sergeant," he said. "Now, would you mind telling me how it concerns me?"

"You know how it concerns you. You went to a lot of trouble to set the stage for a nice little act which you staged in Betcher's apartment this afternoon. You went up there with a pillow under your clothes. You arranged things so that you had a few minutes alone in Betcher's room. Those few minutes were sufficient for you to identify the pillow that had the twenty-five thousand dollars in it. You couldn't take the time there to search around in the feathers and find the roll of bills, so you simply *switched pillows!* You took the one which you had used as padding and placed it on Betcher's bed, took the one on Betcher's bed which was sealed up with a piece of adhesive tape and put it inside of your clothes as padding, and then went down the hall to terminate your 'employment' of Betcher. You did the whole thing so elaborately no one suspected that your real purpose was to have a few minutes alone in Betcher's room in the hotel."

Lester Leith nodded. "Sergeant," he said, "I admire much of your deductive reasoning. As it happens, this time you're a lot closer to the true facts of the case than is ordinarily the case. To be frank with you, Sergeant, I noticed the discrepancy between the condition of that feather and Alcott's story as soon as I saw his picture in the paper. Then when I saw the picture taken after he was booked and noticed that one of the strips of adhesive tape was missing, I thought that it was quite possible that he had concealed the money in a pillow somewhere, and that the white feather had stuck to his fingers when he pulled it out.

"However, Sergeant, my interest in crime is only academic. It's that of a student. The practical application of my theories to a solution of the crime has no particular charm for me.

"However, it did occur to me that Betcher might perhaps be a crook, and I suggested the matter to Scuttle, my valet. He thought that Betcher was quite honest. The thing got to a point where we laid a wager on it, and I believe that you —"

"That's enough," Sergeant Ackley interrupted. "We're not interested in anything about that. We have a search warrant. We're going to search your apartment, and if we find a pillow with adhesive tape on it —"

"Just a moment, Sergeant," Captain Carmichael said. "I think Mr. Leith's comments constitute damaging admissions. I think we should hear him out. Do you admit, Mr. Leith, that you posed as Mr. Randerman, and that you and Mrs. Rander-

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man went to all that elaborate build-up for the purpose of making contact with Betcher?"

"Certainly," Leith said.

Captain Carmichael frowned. "I'm afraid," he said, "you're going to have some difficulty explaining that."

"Oh, not at all," Leith said. "It's simply the result of a wager. Sergeant Ackley knows all about it. In fact, he's a party to the wager."

Sergeant Ackley said, "I can explain it all, Captain. But this isn't the time."

"In fact," Leith said, "I have already paid that wager to my valet, and I have reason to believe that he's passed Sergeant Ackley's share on to him."

Captain Carmichael frowned. "Is that true, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Well," Sergeant Ackley said, "it was a private matter, and —"

"Private matter!" Captain Carmichael roared. "It would make the department the laughing-stock of the newspapers, and why the devil didn't you report it?"

"I didn't think it was —"

"I know why you didn't report it," Captain Carmichael said. "You wanted to chisel twenty-five dollars."

"At the time," Sergeant Ackley said, "I thought it was best. I —"

"I notice there was nothing about that wager mentioned in your reports. . . . Get busy, men. You have a search warrant. Look through these pillows and see if you can find one which has been cut, and the cut repaired with adhesive tape."

Lester Leith said, in a slow drawl, "Of course, Captain, you know this is an inexcusable outrage. I should resent it, only I'm rather tired tonight, and being resentful consumes a lot of energy, don't you think?"

Captain Carmichael said nothing.

Sergeant Ackley, who had popped into the bedroom, let out a whoop of delight. He returned to the living room, holding up a pillow in one end of which a small cut had been patched up with a piece of adhesive tape. "This is it!" he shouted. "This will convict him. This is all the evidence we need."

Leith said, "That's nonsense, Sergeant. I told you that white feather had caused me to wonder about Alcott. In the privacy of my own apartment I made an experiment to determine whether a small hole in a pillow could be plugged with adhesive tape taken from a bandage. I found that it could."

Sergeant Ackley said gloatingly, "You'll have a chance to tell that to the jury," he said. "This is the same pillow which was taken from Betcher's hotel. I can swear to it. I've seen the pillows. I can identify them. Now then, you supercilious crook, laugh *that* off."

One of the detectives who had entered Beaver's bedroom came running into the living room, carrying a pillow. "I've found it, Captain," he said.

There was grim silence while the detective peeled back the pillowcase to show a second pillow with a cut covered with adhesive tape.

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"Any other pillows?" Captain Carmichael asked dryly.

The detective said, "Gosh, Captain, I didn't look. I found this one. It was the first one I looked at, and —"

"Look at the others," Captain Carmichael said.

The crestfallen Sergeant Ackley and the other detectives returned to their search. In the next five minutes they uncovered six pillows. Each one had been cut, and the cut had been patched with adhesive tape.

Lester Leith, who had been calmly smoking during the search, picked up his magazine and started to read.

Captain Carmichael, fighting back a twinkle which persisted in creeping into his frosty eyes, said, "What's your explanation of these pillows, Leith?"

Leith looked up from the magazine. "Those?" he said. "Oh, just a psychological experiment, Captain. You know, I'm one of these confounded amateurs who likes to read about crime in the newspapers, and then try to work out some purely academic solution."

Captain Carmichael said, "I'm afraid, Leith, that there's enough evidence against you this time to arrest you, even if the evidence isn't strong enough to convict."

Leith said, "Oh, I don't think so, Captain. If I were arrested, it seems to me the police would be placed in rather a peculiar position. In the first place, they'd have to admit that I, a rank outsider and an amateur, uncovered a theory which solved the Mandeville bribe case simply by looking at a perfectly obvious clue contained in a newspaper illustration, a clue which the police had in their fingers, a clue which was staring them right in the face. Furthermore, as a part of my defense, it would appear that I did what I did at the instigation of Sergeant Ackley, who made a surreptitious profit of twenty-five dollars on the transaction, and who, in order to get that twenty-five dollars, assured me *in writing* that it would be no crime to proceed with my plans."

Lester Leith paused and shook his head sadly. "You couldn't convict me," he said, "and it would put the police force in a most unpleasant light. In short, Captain, they'd appear positively ludicrous."

Captain Carmichael's eyes lost their twinkle as they fastened themselves on Sergeant Ackley. "The man's right, Sergeant," he said, "and you have yourself to thank for it."

"But these pillows!"

"Which pillow is the one that came from Betcher's hotel?" the Captain asked.

"Well, of course," Sergeant Ackley said, looking at the pile of pillows on the floor, "they've been pretty well mixed up now, and I —"

"Oh, but you identified one of them as having been the pillow," Lester Leith said. "You were willing to swear to it, Sergeant. Come, come, Sergeant. Can't you pick out the right pillow now?"

Sergeant Ackley's facial expression

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showed only too plainly what was going on in his mind.

Captain Carmichael turned toward the door. "Come, Sergeant," he said. "You're not doing yourself or the Department any good by remaining here. If you ever had a case against Leith, it certainly has been botched up so that the less publicity that's given it the better."

As Captain Carmichael started to close the door, he turned to Lester Leith. "I wish we had your mind on the force," he said. "It might increase our efficiency so far as catching criminals is concerned."

Leith said very courteously, "Thank you, Captain, but it has always seemed to me that the best way to check crime is to deprive the criminals of their ill-gotten spoils."

Captain Carmichael stared at him thoughtfully, and then said slowly, "And there's a chance you may be right at that."

The door closed behind him.

Lester Leith smiled at his valet. "Your loyalty, Scuttle, is touching," he said. "I still don't know how the devil you ever managed to persuade Sergeant Ackley to take over half of that bet and make that endorsement on the letter."

The spy fidgeted uneasily. "Just a matter of tact, sir," he said.

Leith nodded and yawned. "By the way, Scuttle," he said, "I'll have a deposit to make in one of my charitable trust funds tomorrow — a deposit of twenty-five thousand dollars, less the usual ten per cent covering costs of collection. . . ."

"Q"

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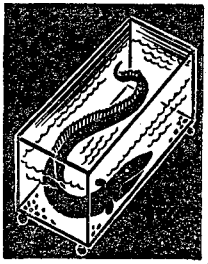
"THE REST WAS ALL IMAGINATION"



Edna St. Vincent Millay holds an almost unique position in American literature. Her poetry has satisfied both the proletariat and the intelligentsia, the commoners and the cognoscenti, the "four million" and the "four hundred." She is one of a handful of first-rank poets whose slim volumes have been, at one and the same time, both bestsellers and collectors' items . . . Like so many other superbly gifted writers through the ages, she began practising her craft in childhood. Her first major poem was published when she was twenty, and her first volume of poetry appeared in print the year she was graduated from Vassar. She was a celebrity in Greenwich Village in that Golden Renaissance when the Village was the American counterpart of the Bohemian Quarter in Paris, when poets and painters lived in cold-water flats which were the American counterparts of the Parisian attics, when sculptors and scribblers on both sides of the Atlantic starved with equal nobility. Ah, those were the days! — when, to quote Miss Millay herself, the artists and authors were all "very, very poor and very, very merry."

Her career has been a literary legend. She joined the Provincetown Players, published three plays in verse, and later wrote the libretto of one of the few American grand operas, "The King's Henchman," by Deems Taylor. In 1923 she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

And now we bring you a tale of murder by Edna St. Vincent Millay — her first acknowledged short story, and so far as we have been able to check, her only short story. Would you have thought it possible? Oh, yes — many times we have pointed out the affinity between poetry and ratiocination; they have much in common, as Edgar Allan Poe was the first to prove. Yes, poets, it has always seemed to us, are peculiarly sensitive to the smell of evil, to the sound of violence, to the sight of cruelty, to the touch of tragedy, to the taste of murder — and to that sixth sense which detects and diagnoses "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

Miss Millay wrote "The Murder in the Fishing Cat" many years ago, when she lived in Paris. One day she was having lunch outdoors, at just such a restaurant as she has described in the story. She was sitting alone at her table — indeed, there was no one else there, except the owner-waiter. She turned her head and over her shoulder, very near to her, she saw a large glass tank in the window of the restaurant. In the slowly churning water of

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the tank, eels were swimming, and somehow she wished the eels were not there . . . The rest was all imagination, inspired by the place, the proprietor — and the piscatorial personæ. Except, of course, as Miss Millay wrote to us, that when you have lived somewhere a long time, you are able to describe things in a fairly accurate way — if, your Editors hasten to add, you are a poet. —

In Miss Millay's prose you will find the qualities of both herself and her poetry — the clear, precise voice and the delicate, almost fragile, image; the intensely personal style which is of simple beauty and beautiful simplicity; and the psychological probing of loneliness and mental fatigue, with their twisting emotional crosscurrents and undercurrents . . .

THE MURDER IN THE FISHING CAT

by EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

NOBODY came any more to the *Restaurant du Chat qui Pêche.* It was difficult to say just why.

The popularity of a restaurant does not depend on the excellence of its cuisine or the cobwebs on the bottles in its cellar. And you might have in the window ten glass tanks instead of one in which moved obscurely shadowy eels and shrimps, yet you could be no surer of success. Jean-Pierre knew this, and he did not reproach himself for his failure. It is something that may happen to the best of us.

For fourteen years he had served as good *lapin sauté* as was to be found in Paris; and if the *petits pois* were rather big and hard, and the Vouvray rather like thin cider, and you got no more than a teaspoonful of sugar with your strawberries, well, what could you expect for seven francs, all told? Not the world, surely. As for the rest, where else might you, while sitting comfortably at your table under a red-and-white awning, choose your eel, and see it captured for you deftly in a napkin, and borne off, writhing muscularly, to the kitchen, to be delivered to you five minutes later on a platter, fried? That was more than you could do at Ciro's.

It might be, of course, because Margot had scolded him much too audibly. But where was the man among his clients whose wife had not at some time or other addressed him as *saligaud*, or *espèce de soupe au lait?* Let him stand forth.

And, anyway, she had gone now. After fourteen years at his side, stamping the butter, whacking the long loaves of bread, sitting down with a sigh to a bowl of onion soup after nine o'clock, she had gone. She had run off with a taxi-driver who had red

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mustaches that curled naturally. And the place was very still.

Jean-Pierre stood in the doorway with a damp cloth in his hand, and watched the people go by. They all went by. Once he had been sure that all were coming in, but now he knew better. They were going to the *Rendezvous des Cochers et Camionneurs*, next door.

"*J'ai pas la veine*," said Jean-Pierre. He stepped out upon the pavement and busily passed the damp cloth over a table which was not yet dry.

A man and a girl went by. Two men went by. A woman went past, selling papers: "*L'Intran'! L'Intransigeant! La Liberté — troisième édition! L'Intran'! L'Intransigeant!*" Two young men went by; one was wearing a smock, the other had a painted picture under his arm. A man and a girl went past with their arms about each other. The man was saying, "*Si, si, c'est vrai.*" A very little girl came along, carrying a basket of small fringe-petaled pinks and fading roses. She had a serious face. She held out the flowers earnestly to a woman, with a coat over her arm, pushing a baby-carriage; to an old man reading a newspaper as he walked; to two young women, dressed precisely alike, who were hurrying somewhere, chattering.

A priest went by, taking long steps, his black gown flapping about his large shoes, his stiff, shallow hat on the back of his head. He was trying to catch a bus. He began to run. The little girl watched him go by, seriously. Still watching him, she held out her flowers to a soldier in a uniform of horizon-blue. Then she went to the restaurant next door and moved among the tables.

"*Sentez, madame*," she said without emotion, and impassively thrust a bunch of pinks under the nose of a young woman, with a very red mouth, whose fork dangled languidly from her hand as she conversed with the man across from her.

"*Merci, merci*," said the woman, and motioned her away without looking at her.

An American boy was dining alone, reading from a yellow book. He looked up from his book, and followed the little girl with his eyes as she moved about the terrace. As she approached him he spoke to her.

"*C'est combien, ça, ma petite?*" he asked.

She came up to him, and pressed her small stomach against the table.

"*Dix sous*," she answered lispingly, staring at his forehead.

He put an arm about her while he selected a nosegay from the basket, stood it up in his empty wine-glass, and poured Vichy for it. Then he gave her a franc and told her to keep the change.

She stared at him, and went off up the street, holding out her basket to the passers-by.

Jean-Pierre came to himself with a start: the proprietor of a flourishing café does not stand all the afternoon gaping at the goings-on in the café next door. No wonder people did not

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come to the *Restaurant du Chat:* it had an absent-minded *patron*. He hurriedly passed the damp cloth over two of the iron-legged tables, plucked a brown leaf from the laurel which hedged the terrace from the pavement proper, and went back into the restaurant.

"*Ça, va, Philippe?*" he questioned jovially of the large eel which was now the sole occupant of the tank.

Not for the life of him could Jean-Pierre have told you why he had addressed the eel as Philippe; but having done so, he was glad. For from the moment he had given the creature a name, it possessed an identity, it was a person, something he could talk to.

He went to the kitchen, and returned with a morsel of lobster from a salad of the night before and tossed it into the pool.

Two men and two women, finding the *Rendezvous des Cochers* crowded, turned in at the *Restaurant du Chat qui Pêche* and seated themselves.

They heard Jean-Pierre singing:

"*Oh, madame, voilà du bon fromage!*
Oh, madame, voilà du bon fromage!
Voilà du bon fromage au lait!"

One of the men rapped on the table with his stick. Jean-Pierre stopped short in his song, caught up the *carte du jour*, smoothed down his black beard, and hurried out.

"Very good, the rabbit," he suggested. And, "What will you have, sirs, in the way of wine?"

For half a year there had been only three of them to do the work — he, his wife, and Maurice, the waiter. Maurice had come to them when he was sixteen; but very soon he was nineteen, and the War Department, which knows about everything, had found out about that also, and had taken him away to put him into the army.

Then for two months there had been only two of them, but it was quite enough. Now Margot was gone, and he was alone. But business was worse and worse, and very rarely was he hurried with all the cooking and the serving and the cleaning-up.

Jean-Pierre had made few friends in Paris in these fourteen years. He had dealt pleasantly with his clients, his neighbors, and the tradespeople with whom he had to do; but he had been content with his wife. She was a pretty woman from the frontier of Spain and more Spanish than French. He had met her for the first time right over there, in the Luxembourg Gardens. He could almost see from his doorway the very tree under which she had been sitting. She was wearing a hat of pink straw sloping down over her forehead, with many little roses piled high under the back of it; and she was very small about the waist. She was embroidering something white.

Several times he passed the chair in which she was sitting, and every time she looked up, and then looked down again. When she arose to go, he fell into step beside her.

"Mademoiselle, may I accompany you?" he asked.

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"No, please," she answered hurriedly, without looking at him, and quickened her step.

He kept pace with her, however, and bent over her and spoke again more softly.

"It is wrong for one so beautiful to be so cruel."

"*Veux-tu me laisser!*" she scolded, tossing her head, and hastened out of sight.

But the next afternoon she was there again.

"You remember my wife, Philippe?" said Jean-Pierre. "Margot of the naughty eyes and the pretty ankles?"

Philippe said nothing.

"You do, all the same," Jean-Pierre averred. "She used to stir the water to make you mad." After a moment he said again, "Philippe, you remember Margot, don't you?"

Philippe said nothing.

"Well, anyhow," said Jean-Pierre, "she's gone."

For three months now Philippe had been alone in the tank. Nobody ate eels any more. The few customers that came ordered rabbit, mutton, or beefsteak and potatoes. It would be foolish to have more eels sent in from the basin in the country. Jean-Pierre had explained that he would need for a time no more eels or shrimps, that he was making some changes.

Every morning when the proprietor of the *Chat qui Pêche* came down to open the door and put the tables and chairs out upon the pavement, Philippe lay sluggishly on the green bottom of his tank, the sunshine bringing out colors on his back that one had not known were there.

It was an oblong glass tank with brass edges. Fresh water came up through a little spout in the middle of it, and the stale water was sucked away through a pipe in one corner, which was covered with a bubble-shaped piece of netting. Looking into the tank one day, Jean-Pierre wondered why the netting was shaped like that; then he reflected that if the wire had been flat over the mouth of the pipe, it would have been clogged always with bits of dirt and food, which would float up to settle on it. He felt very proud when he had come to this conclusion.

Philippe had been at one time gray-green in color, and thin and very active. Now he was green-black, with a valance standing up along his spine of transparent purple, and with two little pale-green fins behind his head. He was big now, but as lithe as ever.

Jean-Pierre had heard queer tales about eels; he did not know how much truth there was in them. He had heard that their mothers came ashore to give birth to them; that they were born, like little animals, not laid, like eggs. And when they were small they were called "elvers." And he had been told that after they were born, their mothers left them, and went away. And in a little while the elvers started out for themselves in search of pools to live in. And if it so happened that the pools nearby had dried up with the heat, they went farther. And it

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was said that they have gone as far as twenty miles, across the land, in search of water, thousands of them, an army of little eels. And no human eye had witnessed their sinuous migration. Only from time to time there was found a dead elver in the grass, and people knew the eels had passed that way.

"*Dis-moi un peu, Philippe,*" said Jean-Pierre. "You are a droll one, aren't you?"

The days went by, and nothing happened in them. Every day a few people came to eat there. Once there had been ten at a time, and Jean-Pierre had said to himself that if this kept on, he would have to get a waiter. But it did not keep on.

Every day he missed his wife more keenly. One day he went across the *rue de Médicis* into the Luxembourg Gardens, and walked up and down past the place where he had first seen her. A young woman was sitting under the tree, embroidering, but she was not Margot. She had two children with her, two little girls, dressed just alike, in very short dresses made all of pale blue silk ruffles. They were chasing one another up and down the walk and calling in shrill voices. One of them lost her hair-ribbon, a pale blue silk bow, and ran sidewise up to her mother, holding in one hand the ribbon and lifting with the other a lock of straight blonde hair at the top of her head; but all the time calling to her sister, and pawing the earth with brown, impatient legs.

Jean-Pierre wished very much that his only child, his and Margot's, had not died of diphtheria. She would have been much prettier than either of these little girls; she had looked like her mother. And she would be a companion for him now. If she were here this afternoon, he would take her to the *Jardin des Plantes* and show her all the different-colored birds. And after that they would go to the *Café des Deux Magots* and sit outside, and he would have a half-blond beer, and she would have a grenadine. And he would buy her one of those small white-and-brown rabbits made all of real fur that hop when you press a bulb, such as old men are always peddling along the pavement from trays suspended in front of their stomachs by a cord about their necks.

The days went by and went by. May passed, and June passed. One day there came a postcard from Maurice, a picture bearing the title, *Panorama de Metz.* On it was written carefully in pencil, *Bon souvenir d'un nouveau poilu aviateur.* Jean-Pierre was very excited about the postcard. Four times that day he drew it from his pocket and read it aloud, then turned it over and read with happiness his own name on the front of it. Late in the afternoon it occurred to him with pleasure that he had not yet read it to Philippe, and he hastened to do so. But from his wife there had come no word.

It seemed to Jean-Pierre that he would give everything he had in the world if he might once again hear

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Margot wail from the terrace, "*Un-e sou-u-u-u-u-pe!*" And, oh, to be called once more a dirty camel, a robber, or a species of dog!

He went to the tank and leaned over the quivering water.

"You are my wife, Philippe. You know?" said Jean-Pierre. "You are a *salope!*"

Having delivered himself of which genial insult, he felt happier, and stood for some moments in his doorway with his arms folded, looking boldly out upon the world.

"*Ça va, mon vieux?*" he accosted the eel one morning, and stirred the top of the water with a lobster-claw. But Philippe scarcely moved. Jean-Pierre reached down with the lobster-claw and tickled his back. The flat tail flapped slightly, but that was all. Jean-Pierre straightened up and pulled at his beard in astonishment. Then he leaned far over, so that his head made a shadow in which the eel was clearly visible, and shouted down to him:

"Philippe, Philippe, my friend, you are not sick, are you?"

He waited eagerly, but there was no responsive motion. The eel lay still.

"Oh, my God!" cried the *patron* of the *Chat qui Pêche*, and clutched his hair in his hands. Then for the first time he noticed that the surface of the water was unusually quiet. No fresh water bubbled up from the tap in the middle.

"Oh, my God!" cried Jean-Pierre again, and rushed to the kitchen.

There was nothing there with which to clean a clogged water-pipe. Everything that was long enough was much too thick. One tine of a fork would go in, but was probably not long enough. Nevertheless, he would try.

He ran back to the window and prodded the tube with a tine of the fork. Then he straightened up and waited, breathless. The water did not come. He rushed again to the kitchen, and scratched about among the cooking utensils. Was there no piece of wire anywhere in the world? A pipe-cleaner! That was it! He searched feverishly through all his pockets, but he knew all the time that he had none. It occurred to him that if Margot were there, she would have a hair-pin, which could be straightened out, and he cursed her savagely that she had gone.

Suddenly his eye fell on the broom, which was standing in a corner. He went over to it and tore forth a handful of splints, with which he rushed back to the tank.

"Wait, wait, Philippe!" he called as he approached. "Don't die! Wait just a very little minute!" And he thrust a splint down into the tube. It broke, and he had difficulty in extracting it. Sweat came out on his forehead. He put two splints together, and inserted them with care.

"Don't die! don't die!" he moaned, but softly, lest the splints should break.

Suddenly, incredibly, the water came, and dust and particles of food began to travel slowly toward the

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outlet. Jean-Pierre thrust his hands in up to the wrists, and shooed the stale water down the tank.

The next morning Philippe was quite himself again. Fearfully, Jean-Pierre crept into the room and approached the window.

"*Comment ça va ce matin?*" he questioned in a timid voice, and put a finger into the pool.

The eel aroused, and wriggled sullenly to the other end of the glass.

Jean-Pierre giggled sharply with delight, and all that morning he went about with a grin on his face, singing, "*Madame, voilà du bon fromage!*"

Jean-Pierre hated the room in which he slept. It seemed to have become, since Margot left, every day dirtier and more untidy. For one thing, of course, he never made the bed. When he crawled into it at night it was just as he had crawled out of it in the morning. The thin blanket dragged always to the floor on one side, the counterpane on the other. The sheets grew grayer and grayer, and the bolster flatter. And he seemed always to have fallen asleep on the button side of the square pillow.

Infrequently he drew off the soiled sheets and put on clean ones. But at such times he became more than usually unhappy; he missed Margot more. She had been used to exclaim always over the fresh bed that it smelled sweet, and to pass her hand with pleasure over the smooth old linen. Often she would say with pride: "I tell you frankly, my little cabbage, in many of the big hotels today, rich hotels, full of Americans, they make up the beds with cotton. I don't see how the clients sleep. I could not."

Every morning on awaking, Jean-Pierre groaned once and turned heavily. Then he rubbed the back of his wrist across his eyes, and stared out at the daylight. He saw on the shelf above the narrow fireplace a pale photograph of himself and his brother when they were children. They were seated in an imitation rowboat. Into his hand had been thrust an imitation oar, which it supported without interest; from the hand of his brother dangled listlessly a handsome string of imitation fish.

He saw also the swathed and ghostly bulk of what he knew to be a clock — a clock so elegant and fine, so ornamented with whorls of shiny brass, that his wife had kept it lovingly wrapped in a towel. To be sure, the face of the clock could not be seen; but what will you? One cannot have everything. Between the clock and the photograph was a marvelous object — a large melon growing serenely in a small-necked bottle. A great trick, that. But Jean-Pierre was very tired of the melon.

He was tired of everything in the room, everything in his life, but particularly of the things on the mantelpiece. And most of all was he tired of the candlestick that stood between the clock and the wreath of wax gardenias — a candlestick which had never known a candle, a flat lily-pad with a green frog squatting on it. Jean-Pierre

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did not know that it was a green frog squatting on a lily-pad. It had been there so long that when he looked at it he no longer saw it. It was only one of the things on the mantelpiece.

One morning, however, as he awoke and groaned and turned and looked out with dull eyes on still another yesterday, it so happened that he stared for some moments at the candlestick. And presently he said, "*Tiens! tiens!*" and laid his forefinger alongside his nose.

That morning he dressed hurriedly, with a little smile going and coming at his lips. And when he was dressed he thrust the candlestick into his pocket and ran downstairs.

"*Bonjour, Philippe!*" he called as he entered the restaurant. "Regard, species of wild man, I bring you a little friend!"

Happily, and with excessive care, he installed the green frog at the bottom of the tank. The eel moved away from it in beautiful curves.

"There is somebody for you to talk to, Philippe," said Jean-Pierre, "as you are for me."

He went to the door and opened it. The morning air came freshly in from the trees and fountains of the Luxembourg.

The days went by and went by, and nothing happened in them. One afternoon Jean-Pierre stood for a long time outside the window of a shop which had the sign up, *Fleurs Naturelles*. It was unfortunate for Margot, he told you frankly, that she had left him, because otherwise on this day she would be receiving a bouquet of flowers, *pois de senteur*, purple, pink, and mauve, and big white *pivoines*. It was the anniversary of their wedding. There were water-lilies in the window, too.

Suddenly Jean-Pierre burst into the flower shop with the face of a boy in love, and after much shrugging and gesticulation and interchange of commonplace insults, he parted from the shopkeeper, and went home to Philippe, bearing a long-stemmed lily.

At twenty minutes to one of an afternoon a week later a man might have been seen to walk along the *quai* of the Seine to the *Place St. Michel*, and then up the *Boulevard St. Michel* to the *rue de Médicis*. On the corner of the *rue de Médicis* he hesitated and looked both ways. Just then a very little girl came up the *boulevard* and held out to him a basket of pinks and roses. He shook his head.

It happened that for that moment these two were the only people on that corner. The little girl stood for a moment beside him, hesitating, looking both ways. Then she tucked her basket under her arm and started up the *rue de Médicis*. And because she had turned that way, the man turned that way, too, letting her decision take the place of his own.

He walked slowly, glancing as he passed at the many people taking their luncheon under the awnings in front of the cafés. He was looking for a place to eat, and it happened that he wished to be alone.

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Before the *Restaurant du Chat qui Pêche* there were six oblong, iron-legged tables, on each of which stood a warted blue-glass vase containing a sprig of faded sweet-william and the wilted stamens of a rose from which the petals had dropped. The place was deserted. There was no sign of life anywhere about, saving only that in one of the windows there was a glass tank filled with slightly quivering water, on the surface of which floated a lily, and on the bottom of which, beside an artificial bright-green frog, dozed a large and sluggish eel.

The man seated himself at one of the tables and tapped upon the table with the vase. There was no response. He tapped again.

"*Voilà!*" called Jean-Pierre from the back of the restaurant, and came eagerly out, holding in his hand the *carte du jour.*

"The rabbit is very good," he suggested, "also the *gigot.* And what will you have, sir, in the way of wine?"

"White wine," said the man, "a half-bottle. A salad of tomatoes, an onion soup, and an *anguille.*"

"*Oui, monsieur,*" said Jean-Pierre. "And after the *andouilles*, what?" *Andouilles* are a kind of sausage.

"Not *andouilles,*" replied the man, with some impatience, "*anguille.*"

"*Oui, monsieur,*" said Jean-Pierre, trembling. He passed his damp cloth over the table and went back into the restaurant. He sat down upon a chair, and his head dropped to one side, his eyes bulging. "*O-o, là là!*" said Jean-Pierre.

Several moments passed. The man on the terrace outside rapped sharply on the table.

"*Voilà!*" called Jean-Pierre, leaping to his feet. Hurriedly he gathered up a folded napkin, a thick white plate, a knife, fork, and spoon, two round bits of bread, and an unlabeled bottle of white wine. With these he issued forth.

When the table was fairly set, he curved one hand behind his ear and leaned down to listen.

"Will *monsieur* kindly repeat his order?" he requested in a half-whisper.

The gentleman did so, with annoyance, glanced up into the face bending over him, frowned, and reached for the wine.

Jean-Pierre went away and returned with the tomato salad. It was very pretty. There were green bits of chopped onion scattered over it. Presently he brought the onion soup. This was not very good. It was composed chiefly of soaked bits of bread, and it was not hot; but with grated cheese it could be made to do.

When the soup was finished, Jean-Pierre appeared again and cleared away the dishes.

"And for the rest, sir," said he, fixing the eyes of his client with his own, which glittered meaningly, "it will be necessary to wait a few moments, you understand."

"Yes, yes," said the man, and shrugged. He wished vaguely he had gone elsewhere for his food.

"Because he is living," Jean-Pierre

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pursued in a clear voice of unaccountable pride, "and it will be necessary first to kill him. See, he lives!" And pulling the man by the sleeve, he pointed with his thumb to the brass-bound tank in the window.

The man glanced askance at the window, and twitched his sleeve free.

"*Encore une demi-bouteille de vin blanc*," he replied.

Jean-Pierre stood for a moment looking down into the water. The eel was stretched along the bottom of the tank, dozing in the sunshine. Once he idly flipped his thick tail, then lay still again. His dark back shone with a somber iridescence.

"*Philippe*," whispered Jean-Pierre, thrusting his face close to the surface of the pool — "*Philippe, mon petit, adieu!*"

At this, tears rushed from his eyes, and his neck and chest tried horridly to sob, working out and in like the shoulders of a cat that is sick.

"O Holy Virgin!" he moaned, and wound the clean white napkin firmly about his hand.

The eel came writhing out into the air. It was muscular and strong. It struck backward with its heavy body. It wound itself about Jean-Pierre's wrist. It was difficult to hold. It was difficult to shift from one hand to the other while one rushed to the kitchen.

Jean-Pierre held the eel to the table and reached for the knife. The knife was gone. Sweat rolled from his forehead, down his cheeks, and into his beard.

He ran wildly from one end of the kitchen to the other, the eel all the time plunging and twisting in his hand. He could not think what it was he was looking for.

The broom! But, no, it was not that. At length he saw the handle of the knife, Margot's knife, with which she used to kill the bread. It was peering at him from under a clutter of red and white onion skins. It had been watching him all this time.

He walked slowly past it, then turned sharply, and snatched it with his hand. He held Philippe firmly down upon the table, turned away his face, and struck with closed eyes. When he looked again, the knife was wedged in the table; Philippe had not been touched. He eased the knife free; the eel struck it with his lashing tail, and it fell to the floor. He stooped to pick it up; the eel reared in his grasp and smote him across the face.

"Ah-h-h!" cried Jean-Pierre, "you would, would you!" Smarting and furious from the blow, he clutched the knife and rose.

"You would, would you!" he said again, between his teeth. His throat thickened. Flames danced before his eyes. "*Eh bien, on verra!* Name of a name! We shall see, my little pigeon!" The flames roared and crackled. His eyes smarted, and his lungs were full of smoke. His heart swelled, burst, and the stored resentment and pain of his long isolation raced through his body, poisoning his blood.

"Take *that* for your lying face!" he cried. "Spaniard!

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"Take *that* for your ankles! *That* for your red mustaches! Take *that!* Take *that!*"

Kneeling on the floor, he beat in the head of Philippe with the handle of the knife.

All the time that the stranger was eating, Jean-Pierre watched him slyly from the door. Twice a small giggle arose to his lips, but he caught at his beard and pulled it down. He was happy for the first time in many months. He had killed the taxi-driver with the red mustaches, he had fried him in six pieces that leaped, and the stranger was eating him.

When the stranger had gone, Jean-Pierre gathered up the dishes and bore them to the kitchen, chuckling as he did so. He saw the head of the eel in the corner whither he had kicked it, and he spat upon it. But when he came back for the wine bottles and the salt and pepper and vinegar and oil, his eyes fell on the tank in the window, with its bright-green frog and its floating lily and its quiet emptiness. Then he remembered that it was Margot that he had killed.

He put his hand to his throat and stared. Margot! Now, how had that happened? He was sure that he had never intended to kill Margot. What a terrible mistake! But, no, it was not true that he had killed Margot. It was an ugly and tiresome dream. There was sun on the trees in the Gardens of the Luxembourg. Was not that proof enough that Margot was not dead, if one had needed proof?

Still, come to think of it, it was a long time since she had been about the house. It was fully a year, if you pressed the point, since he had heard her voice. There was something very dead about her, come to think of it.

But certainly he had killed Margot! How silly of him! He remembered the circumstances now perfectly. They had been out together in a rowboat on a river whose banks were brass. In Margot's hand was an oar, in his a handsome string of fish. At one end of the river was a dam covered by a dome of netted wire. At the other end water bubbled up continuously from a hidden spring.

He looked at Margot. As he looked, the oar slipped softly from her hand into the water; on the other side of the boat the string of fish slipped softly from his hand into the water. Then he noted with disquiet that the water in the river was steadily receding. He looked at the banks; they were like high walls of brass. He looked at them again; they were like tall cliffs of brass. He looked at the river; it was as shallow as a plate of soup.

It occurred to him that if he wanted to drown Margot, he would best be quick about it, as soon there would be no water in which to drown her. "But I do not wish to drown Margot!" he protested. But the man kept rapping on the table with a sprig of sweet-william. And even as he said it, he stepped from the boat, seized her by the waist with both hands, and plunged her beneath the surface.

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Her lithe body doubled powerfully in his grasp. He was astonished at the litheness of her body. Her feet, in elegant shoes of patent-leather with six straps, appeared above the water, the ankles crossed. The top of her head was not even wet. Yet, for all that, the life came out of her. It rose to the surface in a great colored bubble, and floated off into the sunshine.

Jean-Pierre gazed across at the Luxembourg. A child in a white dress passed through a gate into the garden, holding in its hand by a string a blue balloon. Jean-Pierre smiled, and watched the balloon float off.

Over there, under a tree whose blossoms of white and mauve wire drifted like lilies on the air, wearing a white dress and a pink hat with roses piled beneath the brim, forever and ever sat Margot. Over her head, tethered to her wrist by its string, floated forever and ever the blue balloon.

She was very near to him. It was a matter of a moment only to go across to her and lift the hat and say, "*Mademoiselle*, may I accompany you?"

Save that between them, flowing level with its brassy banks past the curb before his door, forever and ever ran the sunny river, full of rolling motor-buses and rocking red taxicabs, too broad, too broad to swim. People went paddling past the window, this way and that way. A priest sailed by in a flapping gown, square boats upon his feet. A little girl went drifting by in a basket; her eyes were closed; her hands were full of brown carnations. Two gendarmes passed, their short capes winging in thick folds.

At the sight of the gendarmes Jean-Pierre started violently and stepped back from the window. There was something he must be about, and that without more delay, but he could not think what it was. Memories of Margot flew at his mind with sharp beaks. He waved his arms about his head to scare them off. There was something he must be about, and that at once.

Something touched him lightly on the shoulder. He uttered an indrawn scream, and swung on his heel. It was only the wall. He had backed into the wall. Yet even as he said to himself, "It is only the wall," and wiped his sleeve across his forehead, he saw them beside him, the two gendarmes, one on the left of him and one on the right. The one on the right of him said to the other:

"This is he, the man who drowned his wife in a plate of soup."

But the other answered: "Not at all. He beat in her head with a knife. Do you not see the onion skins?"

Then for the first time Jean-Pierre saw that both had red mustaches, and he knew that he was lost.

"Come, my man," they said, and stepped back, and he was left standing alone.

Suddenly that part of the floor on which he was standing slipped backward like a jerked rug under his feet, and he was thrown forward on his face. There came a rush of cold wind on the nape of his neck.

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"No, you don't!" he shrieked, and, rolling over violently, leaped into the kitchen and bolted the door.

He knelt behind the door, and addressed them craftily through the keyhole.

"*Messieurs*," he said, "upstairs in my chamber is a melon as big as my head, in a bottle with a neck the size of a pipe-stem. It is the marvel of all Paris. I will give ten thousand francs to the man who can divine me how it came there."

Then he put his ear to the hole and listened, with difficulty restraining himself from chuckling aloud.

In a moment he heard their feet upon the stairs.

He counted the stairs with them as they ascended, nodding his head at each. When he knew that they were at the top, he slipped quietly forth, and bolted the stairway door.

His head was very clear; it was as light as a balloon on his shoulders. He knew precisely what he must do. He must bury the body, remove all traces of his guilt, and get away. And he must lose no time. He took his hat and coat from the peg where they were hanging, and placed them in readiness over a chair by the street door. Then he went softly and swiftly into the kitchen.

He gathered up from the table six sections of a broken backbone, a large knife, and an unwashed platter; from the stove a greasy frying-pan; and from the floor a crushed and blood-stained head. These objects he wrapped in a newspaper, laid upon a chair, and then covered with a cloth.

Hark! Was that a step in the room above? No.

Hastily, he washed the table, scrubbing feverishly until the last stain was removed, scrubbed a wide stain from the floor, and set the kitchen in order.

Hark! Was that a step on the stair? No.

He lifted the newspaper parcel from the chair and bore it, shielded from sight by his apron, into the small backyard behind the restaurant, a yard bare save for a tree of empty bottles, some flower-pots full of dry earth and withered stalks, and a rusted bird-cage with crushed and dented wires.

There he laid his burden down, and after an hour of terror and sweating toil buried it in a hole much bigger than was required.

The afternoon advanced, and evening came. A light flashed on in the *Rendezvous des Cochers et Camionneurs;* farther up the street another light. The street was ablaze. Gay people walked up and down, sat at tables eating, talked eagerly together.

In the *Restaurant du Chat qui Péche* the dusk thickened into dark, the darkness into blackness, and no lights came on. The door was wide open. The night wind came in through the door, and moved about the empty rooms.

At midnight a gendarme, seeing that the door was open and the restaurant in darkness, approached, rapped sharply on the open door, and called. There was no answer.

He closed the door, and went on.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

J. Cameron Smith's "The Rustling Tree" is one of the eight "first stories" which won special awards in last year's competition. In your Editors' opinion it is the best first story submitted in EQMM's Fifth Annual Contest. It has an unusual plot, impressive characterization, and an extraordinary sense of form. A Western detective story, written deliberately from the "wrong" point of view, its storytelling is as authentic as a Western drawl, and as decisive as a Western draw. For the record, the tale required an absolute minimum of re-writing: your Editors deleted exactly nine words and added exactly nine more — all of minor importance.

We have received only two letters from the author — one with the submission of the manuscript, the other accepting our offer to publish the story. We wish we could quote the author's letters in full, but space limitations make that impossible; however, we feel that we must give you at least a few excerpts — with editorial comments.

In Mr. Smith's first communication, he wrote: "This is a difficult letter to write, since it forwards to you my first detective short story. If you were anyone other than Ellery Queen, I would not write a letter, nor would I send this particular story.

"To date, writing has been merely a pleasure for me, as I prefer to retain the despicable habit of eating. I have always written as I pleased, from sonnet sequence to historical novel, and only twice before have I ever hypnotized myself into submitting anything to a professional editor. [Editors' Note: Both submissions ended disastrously, with the inevitable disillusionment and discouragement for Mr. Smith. But Mr. Smith writes too well to keep hiding his work under the bushel-basket of his own personal pleasure. In the larger sense, writing is not a selfish or self-centered art: it is by the few, but for the many.]

"I have tried to give the story the slow pace, slightly pedantic language, and slim dialogue of its earliest ancestors. [Editors' Note: How different this analysis sounds from the average conception of a Western story! And how perceptively accurate Mr. Smith is!]"

In his second letter Mr. Smith wrote: "I could not hope for a better coming-out sponsor than EQMM, for I think your editorial policy combines pleasure with purpose in a thoroughly satisfying manner. [Editors' Note: We hasten to remind you that Mr. Smith wrote those beautiful words after *we had offered to buy his story. Nevertheless, Mr. Smith's perception becomes more and more impressive!]"*

Mr. Smith "was born thirty years ago in Florida of bluestockinged South Carolinian ancestry . . . Aptitude, achievement, and other

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tests [in college] revealed an equally high aptitude for teaching, law, mathematics, science, engineering, journalism, and art. Thus far, I have passed three years teaching high school English, one year doing mechanical engineering research, and more recent years in work with statistics and accounting. Also, in the evenings, I have been making some headway toward a degree in law. [Editors' Note: A not untypical background for a writer — for in the larger sense, writers are jacks-of-all-trades.]

"My favorite recreations, aside from writing, include reading, good music, theatre, walking, dogs and cats, and observing people in public places. [Editors' Note: Which somehow reminds us of the perfect formula for a bestseller: most readers like stories about Abraham Lincoln; most readers like stories about doctors; most readers like stories about dogs — so all a writer has to do is give the public a story about Lincoln's doctor's dog! But seriously: Mr. Smith has the "makings" of a fine writer. Read his first story and see if you don't agree with us. We predict a bright future for J. Cameron Smith — in the pages of EQMM and in the pages of other magazines . . .]"

THE RUSTLING TREE

by J. CAMERON SMITH

IN THE green-tufted bend where the river swirled inward, to run side by side with riders on the trail, stood a single towering oak, its great trunk rising mightily from the earth and flinging heavy limbs wide in sweeping arrogance. Along the river bank at its base stretched a sparsely-grown field of stunted crosses, most of them gray and wrinkled with age.

An occasional solitary night rider shuddered vaguely as he passed the tree, but the horsemen who habitually traveled between the sprawling valley ranches and the little frame town more often dipped their broad brims in salute.

Not infrequently huge parties of men galloped up suddenly and dismounted under the tree with much talking and milling about. At last, a rope would fly over a waiting limb and a trembling horse be slapped into a frightened dash away. Thereafter, the huge party would ride away more slowly than it had come, and a raw new cross would sprout from the river bank beside The Rustling Tree.

Shortly after sunrise one morning, a buckboard from a valley ranch came leisurely down the trail to town. Long habit carried the driver's gaze ahead to The Tree, and what he saw there caused him to cluck hastily to his team.

A man's body swung awkwardly in

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the slight dawn breeze; there was no sign of a hanging party, nor was the ground churned from many hoofs.

The driver swung his nervous team under The Tree and climbed upon the seat. The rope cut, he lowered the body into the back of the buckboard and turned it for a good look at the face. His jaw dropped then with astonishment. It was a rider from his ranch.

The driver stood perplexed. There had been a boisterous farewell party for the trail drivers two nights before, but no disturbance that could have resulted in this. How was this hanging to be explained? By time-honored valley custom, The Rustling Tree was used only to rid the ranchers of horse and cattle thieves. By custom, all ranchers were notified when a thief was caught. And, by custom, the trespasser was promptly buried.

Refusing to consider the enigma further, the driver whipped his team around and headed back. Let the rancher himself decide the matter.

The rancher found no better solution than his driver, for the entire valley was engrossed in speculations of the fortune that would be theirs when the herds just departed should reach the railroads and the northern buyers. So the problem was swallowed up in the greater excitement over the cattle drive.

Two days out on the northern trail, rustlers struck the herds by night. The consternation wrought when the surviving cowboys straggled into the valley overshadowed any other concern. The mystery of The Rustling Tree was soon relegated to legend and became an evening bunkhouse tale without a proper beginning or end . . .

There was yet another story that passed along the back ways of the outlaw trails and was complete in every part . . .

Before the roundup season began, a band of men had taken up a discreet residence in the timbered hills that bordered the western extremity of the valley. A compact band of forty or more, they differed greatly in appearance, but had in common certain definitive characteristics.

There was, about even the stoutest and most jovial, a vague atmosphere of tension, of muscles corded and unrelaxed. Their gestures were not the broad gestures of the candid man, but tight, narrow, almost womanly little hand motions, close to the body, and in their eyes was the spectre of pursuers just beyond the hills.

Of all the group there were perhaps half a dozen who varied from this design. Of these, the most singular was the man called Luce. In form and coloring he had a trick of blending with the humanity around him. His essential difference was in his voice. His eyes looked on impersonally, almost abstractedly, while his voice suggested anger, without being angry, pleasure, without being pleased, and command, without commanding.

In the men who followed Luce this

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extreme control had bred a type of admiration akin to fear. The man who lives at the mercy of his emotions, although his own instincts be far from good, finds something infinitely sinister in the aspect of a man for whom emotion, as a personal cause of action, does not exist.

It is said that leaders are more often bullies than not. The man called Luce was not a bully; he was not, in reality, a leader. He was simply a solitary man at the apex of a crowd.

Many men had offered theories; none could say with certainty how it came about that Luce was a rustler. For most, it was sufficient that his success was phenomenal. Those who sometimes chafed under his orders may not have realized that this success was owed to a passion for exactitude.

Having confirmed the rumor of a combined valley cattle drive, he was presented with an unusual opportunity for his talents. If he could make off into Mexico with several herds at once, the profit would be immense and the mortality negligible. In such an attack, however, two elements must be absolute: surprise and accuracy of information.

To preserve surprise, some person of authority must maintain a constant vigil over the band, insuring that no incident occurred to indicate the presence of rustlers in the valley. To this task, Luce alone was adequate.

For reliable details of the projected drive, it would be necessary to place men on the ranches. Since cattlemen were fast growing suspicious of the wandering cowboy in trail time, few of the rustlers could satisfactorily handle such an assignment. Luce selected his men with care.

There was Big Red, a large-boned man with heavy shoulders and long muscled thighs who found sheer pleasure in the raw physical test of man against steer, man against man. A ranch foreman would size up Big Red as a man of small ambition, thus accounting for his itinerant state. Luce had one misgiving: he knew Big Red was not in a deep sense a bad man, that he would some day break away and settle down to ranching to which he was by temperament more suited than to rustling. The jolt which would arouse Big Red from his inertia would surely be a woman. Ranchers have daughters and nieces. Luce shrugged. What man can anticipate a woman?

His second choice was the untried youngster, Bitt. The slight, wiry kid had stumbled into the gang one bleak wintry night, evading a careless stepfather. Bitt claimed to be twenty-one; he may have been eighteen. Obviously, his head teemed with ideas of becoming a famous gunman like Grandee; the ancient six-gun he affected was more hindrance than help. The touchiness of adolescence lingered in him, together with its fanatic loyalty and adoration. With horses, however, he became a man, his gentle firmness almost never failing to win a quick response. Luce believed that the alert youngster would appeal

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strongly to a ranchman seeking hands to break in a trail remuda.

Luce next chose Pa Hummer, a stoop-shouldered, lightly grizzled man whom many years of rustling had left well-versed in the ways of men, cattle, and gunplay. Pa was a drooping, sloppy-looking rider, paradoxically impossible to unseat. His hand was deft at running a quick brand. To other than an unnaturally discerning range man he would appear as the typical wandering cowboy, now grown somewhat gray with his travels. There was no fear that Pa might talk too much, and less that he might throw in with the ranchers; Pa's trouble was an inability to face a foe in the open. He had a chronic aptitude for taking his revenge from the advantage of a shaded hillside.

The fourth spotter was known to the gang as The Sheriff. Short, stout, and hearty, he was given to wearing excessively wide-brimmed hats to cover his baldness and preferred trousers tucked into boots in lieu of conventional range garb. Well-informed on western law and law men, it was told that once he had actually been pressed into service as a deputy in pursuit of his own gang. He was an excellent camp cook, a good team driver, and deadly with a gun. Luce counted on the first two accomplishments to secure him a berth in the valley. The man who professes a liking for the cookpot is seldom regarded as dangerous.

Luce had hoped to locate his men one each on the four big valley spreads. However, the Lazy Y turned Pa Hummer away and Pa consequently went on to the huge H & D with Bitt, where both were taken on. Big Red was accepted at the Split Rail, and The Sheriff at the Boxed Lightning.

The meeting place agreed upon was the point where the four ranches came together at the jutting foot of the hills. It was about two hours riding from the nearest ranch buildings and a far longer descent from the rustler camp. To vary the monotony of the cramped and chilly mountain life, Luce permitted his men to serve by turn at the rendezvous point, leaving the camp before dawn, watching from a tree-screened ledge by day and returning after nightfall. Sometimes days passed without contact; nonetheless, Luce soon became as familiar with life in the valley as with his own.

When a man returned with news, Luce sat around the fire with his men, at times probing with questions, and again, merely listening and watching as the light played over the avid faces of the men shut away from the life below.

He heard the history of The Rustling Tree and surmised that the valley had never been seriously troubled with cow thieves except for venturesome Mexicans or a lone outlaw on his way to the Border. He knew the aging partners, Hart and Dobe, and visualized the pampered and pretty granddaughter, tomboy Patricia Hart. He heard of Big Red's

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attachment for a Breed senorita and watched the envy stir in his men. He knew all the foremen, all the cowboys, all the ranchers' women. Above all, he learned about the cattle.

Supplies and wagons were rapidly being readied on the central H & D. The roundup was complete; trail branding had begun. They were making the drive with four-year-olds, pick of all the herds, and twelve thousand head in all. The drive would follow along the river to the pass at the extreme end of the valley, some fifteen miles away, and bed there its first night. Luce figured to hit the herd on the second night out and swing around the hills into Mexico.

Were the ranchers expecting trouble? Farther north, yes. Big-time rustlers, possibly stray Indians. As a precaution, the trail bosses were carrying ten extra gun-hands to whom trouble of that kind was no novelty. Luce glanced at his own master gunman, Grandee, with his picked crew of twelve-odd killers. The firelight caught the quickened glint in their eyes, the suddenly indrawn nostrils, the reassuring movement of hands to gun butts. They were ready.

Inevitably, it came Grandee's turn at the rendezvous. Luce saw him go with reluctance. The close confinement had left the gunman in a hair-trigger frame of mind.

In every group there is some outstanding member who is consciously disliked by almost all, but whose value to the organization precludes any open admission of this. In this band, the member was Grandee. The gunman was a small man with a fluid walk, so strongly aware of his maleness that he dwarfed the virility of men half again his size. He was a man no woman could ignore, the reaction being either an unexplainable compulsion toward or an equally unexplainable revulsion from — a reaction of the senses, not of the mind. Shrinking from the indignity of a fist fight, Grandee backed up the summer lightning of his temper with a legendary draw. On past locations he had slipped into nearby towns and provided Luce with several bad moments, for he was not a man who could appear casually anywhere.

Midnight came and went, and Grandee had not returned. The camp moved uneasily. Luce doubled his lookout, placed the settled Hankins in charge, and set off down the mountain with the Irishman, Foyle. By daylight they had almost reached their goal when the whinny of a horse halted them. Luce dismounted and went ahead. It was Grandee's horse, tethered to a tree. Grandee himself was sprawled stiffly against the bank at the rear of the ledge. He had been dead for many hours.

Dispassionately, Luce studied the scene and the dead man. Grandee was lying drawn up slightly on his right side, right arm stretched along the ledge in an attitude of reaching, left hand free and fingers just touching his unfired gun. Luce raised the dead man; the bullet had evidently entered as he lay there, passing through

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cleanly, and lodged in the dirt at his back. Luce bent closer. A darkened bruise and scratches ran along the gunman's upturned left jaw. On the ledge, several freshly chipped places indicated rough and hasty movement.

It had rained on the morning of the previous day. Luce looked down where the rocks and trees ended. There in the open was a sizable strip of dried mud, marked with the prints of horses. Examination was risky without cover, but the failure or success of his plans might well hang on Grandee's death. With Foyle scanning the ranchland horizon, he scrambled down the rocky incline and viewed the tracks.

Two horses. One had come up slowly, walked up and down the fringe of trees and returned to a stand before those hiding the ledge. The other, a heavier horse, had come up fast and hard, heading straight for the spot. The deeper tracks were superimposed in places on those of the other. All tracks appeared of an even freshness; it was reasonable to suppose that the hard-riding horseman had arrived not long after the first, possibly on his heels. The tracks departed in parallel. From that point it was impossible to say toward which ranch they were headed, and trailing was out of the question.

Luce tasted the puzzle. If a cowhand had discovered Grandee, and somehow managed — which was the most intriguing part of the affair — to get the drop on him, why had the wrangler not carried off the body and later returned with other cowmen to investigate Grandee's back trail? Any cowman would have recognized Grandee for what he was, would have noted the evidence of frequent use of the ledge. By this time the wooded slopes should have been bristling with cowboys searching for rustler sign. Yet the valley and hillsides were undisturbed.

Luce sent Foyle back to camp with Grandee's body, and with instructions to shift the main camp to the head of the pass at once. That day nothing happened. At night Foyle returned with food. Luce decided to wait for a personal contact with his men.

On the following day he was rewarded. Big Red, Pa, and The Sheriff showed up, Big Red in the forenoon and the latter two at dusk. They seemed in complete ignorance of any unusual event and Luce did not enlighten them. A farewell valley party was scheduled at the H & D for the Wednesday night, and the long awaited drive was to begin at Thursday dawn. It was then Monday.

On Tuesday the youngster Bitt put in an appearance. There was still no change in the ranchers' plans. Evidently, they were as unaware of Grandee's death as they had been of his living presence nearby.

Luce had given final orders to his men. Now he removed all traces of human occupancy of the ledge and made his way back to the skeleton camp.

There he found excitement high.

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Briefly, he dispelled their fears. The ranchers were not on the war path; by the same token, neither were the townsfolk. They themselves could warrant that there were no other unauthorized inhabitants in the area who might have attacked Grandee.

For Luce, the answer was appallingly simple. Grandee had been killed by one of the men he went to contact. The questions were: which one, why, and what should be done about it?

The camp fire blazed that night on a strange court of inquiry — the man Luce and an assorted bunch of troubled rustlers.

"Most likely it was Pa," was the opening comment by Miller, to whom Grandee's job would now fall. "Pa, he hated 'im, same's I did, 'ceptin' Pa, he'd never admit it. Pa likely come up and seen who was there. Nobody else around, he figgered it was his chanct to git even. He jist shot and rode away."

"And Grandee," interrupted Luce, "who never trusted no man, and could see everybody comin' thet way, why, he jist stood there and let Pa gun him down?"

"Naw, couldn'a been thet-a-way, I guess," agreed Miller. "Lessee now. Two horses, you said. Mebbe the kid comes up and gits Grandee's attention; then Pa shoots him. Not onlikely Pa and Bitt has got to be pards on thet ranch."

"Thet can't be right," interjected Foyle. "Bitt, he didn't know no better and kinda looked up to Grandee. He wouldn't have no part of a play like thet. If he seen Pa kill Grandee, or knowed he did, he would'a told Luce fer sure."

"Any of 'em would'a told," argued Matterson, "onless they had a mighty pers'nal reason fer keepin' quiet. And whoever 'twas has got a mighty pers'nal reason. Durn his hide, he must'a drawed 'thout no warnin' a-tall, fer nutherwise, Grandee would'a splattered him all over thet hill."

"Grandee was knocked down," said Luce. "In my book, thet's warnin' a-plenty."

"Fightin', now, thet's Big Red fer you," offered Hayes. "They must'a had a row. Red knocked him down and when Grandee went fer his gun, Red shot 'im."

"Red," remarked Luce, "has turned overnight into a right fair gun-hand if he let Grandee start his draw and then outgunned 'im. Grandee's left was free to draw."

"Ees happen thees way, I theenk," said Juan Yocito. "Senor Red, he ees stand there, green-eeng the way he green. He waits, he weel heet thees Grandee some mor' when he get op. He no theenk of gons. Senor Shereef, he com' op behin' Senor Red. He know thees Grandee ees theenk of gons; he weel keel Senor Red. Queeck, Senor Shereef, he ver' fas', he shoots. Shoots too good, he keel heem."

"So," concluded Luce, "with two men to swear what happened, thet no killin' was meant, 'cept by Grandee, both of 'em are afraid to tell."

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"No, senor, they not be 'fraid to tell," murmured Juan.

"The Sheriff, thet's an idee," ejaculated Whitey. "We all seen times when it looked like The Sheriff was gonna put it up to Grandee, like Juan says, he's a very fast man. Could be he slugged Grandee and beat 'im to it whilst Grandee was fallin'."

"The Sheriff," said Luce, "is a cool-headed man. Like you say, there's been times when it looked like a test was comin' up. Only The Sheriff, bein' cool, held his hand. Don't seem nat'ral he'd fly off at the ranchers' back door and with twelve thousand head on his mind."

"Guess you're right," assented Whitey. "The Sheriff wouldn't risk the herd jist to git Grandee. He could wait."

A hard silence fell, broken at last by Luce. He spoke in a detached manner.

"Thet first horse was a reel light cow pony. Seems a onlikely mount fer any of our men. Pa, mebbe. Not Big Red or The Sheriff. Bitt, he likes a big horse, too. Thet was a quick-footed horse, I'm thinkin', fer climbin'. The first rider, now, he knew 'bout where he was headin', but not jist the spot. He'd seen another rider, mebbe more'n one, ride up to them trees and disappear. Say two, three days, a week before. He came out a-purpose to have a look-see on thet hill. Now, what call's a cowpoke to be actin' thet way? He ain't. First off he seen somethin', he'd tell his boss. And then they'd come a bunch a-lookin'. Town man? No town man's a-goin' to be caught slippin' around thet range. Mex? Not in daylight. A woman, mebbe? Now, range women is right sensible; they wouldn't be strayin' off 'thout comp'ny. *Onless they was only half-growed!* A half-growed, unbroke woman is the durndest thing livin'. Walk right in, free and easy, where you and me, we'd be crawlin' on our bellies and cussin' ever' inch of the way. Sly, too. Keeps things to the'selves till they're tired holdin' it back, and then, spills it all over the range. I reckon this first rider was old man Hart's granddaughter. Always turnin' up where she ain't wanted. Seen our men goin' in them trees. Didn't nothin' happen, so she don't say nothin'. Thinks she'll find out fer herself.

"And what's Grandee a-doin' all thet time? Is he high-tailin' out of there like he should'a been? We all knowed Grandee. Naw, he's jist a-settin' and a-purrin'. He'd been thinkin' a heap 'bout Red's senorita. So, there he set, and up she come. Now, there's another thing 'bout gals like thet. They got a instinct tells 'em when the chips is down. This gal, she knowed she'd botched it, right off. She didn't waste no time caterwaulin', she started kickin' and clawin'.

" 'N the meantime, somebody else was comin', somebody who suspicioned thet gal and started lookin' fer her. When he spied them cow pony tracks, he lit out from thet

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ranch at a lather. He didn't stop to think. He tore up to thet ledge and there they was. He flew at Grandee and knocked him down. Thet boy, he was sick inside, thinkin' how he'd wanted to be like Grandee. Grandee, he jist lay there; he knew the kid wouldn't hurt him. Even when the kid hauled out thet old gun, his hand a-shakin' so he couldn't hardly hold it, and told Grandee to lay off or he'd shoot 'im — even then, Grandee wasn't scared. The gal was still standin' there. Grandee stretched out his right hand toward thet gal and laughed. He shouldn't 'a laughed."

Luce paused and straightened. "We'll miss Grandee's gun. What I'm thinkin', will we miss the herd, too? It's plain to see where Bitt is headin'. The gal, well, she's broke now, she'll wait fer him to say. And him, mebbe he don't know it yet, hisself, but he made his choice on thet ledge. He's workin' it around in his mind now, but I'm thinkin' he won't let thet herd leave without a warnin' of what's in store. He'll twist and squirm and put it off till he can't put it off no more. Then they'll stop the drive, temp'rary, and start huntin' fer us, or more'n likely, they'll go on like nothin's up and we — we'll ride straight into it."

The silence settled down again. Miller cleared his throat. " 'Pears to me we put in a heap of time to git run off now. Mighty bad about Grandee. Mighty bad about Bitt, but seems like he'll have to put off talkin' some more. Seems like."

A circle of grunts answered.

"When you figger he'll break, Luce?" inquired Foyle.

"Well, I calc'late thet party tomorrow night. *La Paloma. Ridin' Old Paint.* Thet'll break him."

"Specs we'd best be havin' a party ourselves, long about thet time," said Miller. "No noise, I don't reckon. Won't be too easy a-doin'."

Luce's voice was unchanged. "When the ranch folks git around to missin' Bitt, they'll think he stowed away on a wagon, boy-like. Juan, one more vaquero ain't likely to be noticed in the dark at thet party."

"Si, Senor Luce," said the Mexican. "Where I breeng heem?"

"The ranchers have already picked the place fer us. They calls it The Rustling Tree."

SPECIAL BINDER OFFER

Because of the large number of reader requests, *ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE* has procured a supply of strong, handsome binders for your copies of *EQMM*. Each binder holds one complete volume — that is, six issues of the magazine. It is easy to use, handy, convenient, and economical. The price is $1.00 postpaid. Send your order and remittance to: Special Binder Dept., Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 570 Lexington Ave., New York 22, New York.

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THE BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Of the most recent crop, six novels and two books of factual crime are herewith wholeheartedly recommended to every aficionado:

Josephine Tey's BRAT FARRAR (Macmillan)

In which the author of last year's unforgettable THE FRANCHISE AFFAIR constructs a fine, full-blooded novel about a likable claimant who happens upon evidence of a murder which he can solve only by revealing his own imposture — a deft dilemma masterfully handled.

George Hopley's FRIGHT (Rinehart)

A period novel of middle-class murder two wars ago, imperfectly constructed, but told with the compulsive black magic of cumulative terror which only Hopley (and Woolrich and Irish) can attain.

Hildegarde Tolman Teilhet's THE RIM OF TERROR (Coward-McCann)

The latest and possibly best of Mrs. Teilhet's demonstrations of the fact that she understands the secret of minutely detailed suspense as well as Alfred Hitchcock in his prime, this time dealing with the perils of a nice Vermont girl who encounters secret agents in the Pacific Northwest. (Like the Hopley, this item is not recommended to cardiac cases.)

Edmund Crispin's SUDDEN VENGEANCE (Dodd, Mead)

Less well integrated than many of the cases of Gervase Fen, but as witty (largely at the expense of the British film industry) and literate as ever, and suggesting that the outstanding disciple of Carter Dickson farce may soon come to rival the eerie John Dickson Carr of such works of macabre horror as THE CROOKED HINGE.

Arthur W. Upfield's THE WIDOWS OF BROOME (Crime Club)

In which a fetichistic mass-murderer meets his nemesis in what is probably my favorite detective in current practise, half-caste Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte — a novel with all the solid Upfield virtues plus the unusual subtropical setting of northwest Australia.

Thomas Sterling's THE HOUSE WITHOUT A DOOR (Simon & Schuster)

An out-of-the-ordinary and impressive first novel, marred by a little ponderous prose-writing, but distinguished by believable detection, fine nat-

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uralism in characters and locale, and the striking portrait of a recluse who leaves her hotel room for the first time in 35 years . . . and walks into murder.

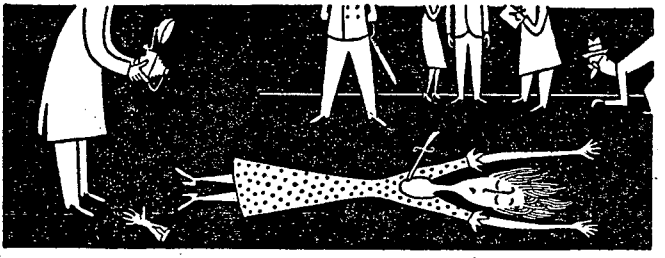
Edgar Lustgarten's VERDICT IN DISPUTE (Scribner's)

One of the most noteworthy fact-crime books since the death of Edmund Pearson, in which Lustgarten employs his talents both as novelist and as barrister to cast fresh light on six immortal murder trials (Maybrick, Borden, etc.) in which the verdict of the jury seems unaccountable to later scholars.

Jean Belin's SECRETS OF THE SÛRETÉ (Putnam's)

By no means another of the standard memoirs of retired police chiefs, but the stimulating chronicle of an attractive and intelligent man, as Gallic as the baffling killer Landru whom he arrested — a series of striking crime stories told by a protagonist who is one part Maigret and two parts Brigadier Gerard.

Briefer recommendations include D. B. Olsen's SOMETHING ABOUT MIDNIGHT (Crime Club), one of her best books to date and suggesting a laudable trend away from quaint detection to straight novelistic suspense; William O'Farrell's CAUSEWAY TO THE PAST (Duell, Sloan & Pearce), a fine blend of modern economy and tempo with Victorian intricacy of plot-counter-plot; E. R. Punshon's SO MANY DOORS (Macmillan), in conception one of Punshon's strongest murder novels, if in leisurely execution one of his slowest; Richard Starnes' AND WHEN SHE WAS BAD SHE WAS MURDERED (Lippincott), an awkward but promising first-novel attempt at the Dickson-Crispin blend of light amusement and formal detection; Octavus Roy Cohen's A BULLET FOR MY LOVE (Macmillan), a topdrawer specimen of its author's adroitness in the slick-glamor detective story; and Paul H. Dobbins' FATAL FINALE (Phoenix), in which you'll be happy to overlook some unedited flaws if you too are a breathless enthusiast of circuses and high-wire acts.



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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE: STANLEY ELLIN

Stanley Ellin is one of EQMM's meteoric discoveries. His first short story, "The Specialty of the House," won a special award in our 1947 Annual Contest, and many readers (including so discerning a connoisseur as Christopher Morley) believed it to be the finest story in THE QUEEN'S AWARDS, 1948. *His second tale, "The Cat's-Paw," won a second prize in our 1948 Contest, and many readers considered it among the six best stories in* THE QUEEN'S AWARDS, 1949. *Simon & Schuster published his first novel,* DREADFUL SUMMIT, *and it proved an encouraging success; you will see it soon in the movies.*

Speaking for ourselves, we think Stanley Ellin has a terrific future as a detective-crime writer. He is a "natural," and his great natural talent is bound to grow and mature with sustained work. But, of course, we're prejudiced . . . On the other hand, here is what a completely unbiased outsider thinks: in one of his "Theatre . . ." columns, among "Thursday Meditations About This and That," Richard Watts, Jr. declared: "The best new writer of mystery fiction I have come across in quite a while is Stanley Ellin, whose short stories, 'The Specialty of the House' and 'The Cat's-Paw,' are minor masterpieces . . ." This comment was sandwiched in between meditations on Turhan Bey and Westbrook Pegler. Mr. Watts neglected to mention that Stanley Ellin's stories first appeared in EQMM, but we have no reluctance at all in mentioning the source of Mr. Watt's column — the "New York Post Home News," of June 2, 1949.

Now we bring you Stanley Ellin's most recent prize-winner — another homicidal humdinger. Further remarks after you have read the story . . .

THE ORDERLY WORLD OF MR. APPLEBY

by STANLEY ELLIN

MR. APPLEBY was a small, prim man who wore rimless spectacles, parted his graying hair in the middle, and took sober pleasure in pointing out that there was no room in the properly organized life for the operations of Chance. Consequently, when he decided that the time had come to investigate the most efficient methods for disposing of his wife he knew where to look.

He found the book, a text on forensic medicine, on the shelf of a second-hand bookshop among several volumes of like topic, and since all but one were in a distressingly shabby and dog-eared state which offended him to his very core, he chose the

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only one in reasonably good condition. Most of the cases it presented, he discovered on closer examination, were horrid studies of the results (vividly illustrated) of madness and lust — enough to set any decent man wondering at the number of monsters inhabiting the earth. One case, however, seemed to be exactly what he was looking for, and this he made the object of his most intensive study.

It was the case of Mrs. X (the book was replete with Mrs. X's, and Mr. Y's, and Miss Z's) who died after what was presumably an accidental fall on a scatter rug in her home. However, a lawyer representing the interests of the late lamented charged her husband with murder, and at a coroner's investigation was attempting to prove his charge when the accused abruptly settled matters by dropping dead of a heart attack.

All this was of moderate interest to Mr. Appleby whose motive, a desire to come into the immediate possession of his wife's estate, was strikingly similar to the alleged motive of Mrs. X's husband. But more important were the actual details of the case. Mrs. X had been in the act of bringing him a glass of water, said her husband, when the scatter rug, as scatter rugs will, had suddenly slipped from under her feet.

In rebuttal the indefatigable lawyer had produced a medical authority who made clear through a number of charts (all of which were handsomely reproduced in the book) that in the act of receiving the glass of water it would have been child's-play for the husband to lay one hand behind his wife's shoulder, another hand along her jaw, and with a sudden thrust produce the same drastic results as the fall on the scatter rug, without leaving any clues as to the nature of his crime.

It should be made clear now that in studying these charts and explanations relentlessly Mr. Appleby was not acting the part of the greedy man going to any lengths to appease that greed. True, it was money he wanted, but it was money for the maintenance of what he regarded as a holy cause. And that was the Shop: *Appleby, Antiques and Curios.*

The Shop was the sun of Mr. Appleby's universe. He had bought it twenty years before with the pittance left by his father, and at best it provided him with a poor living. At worst — and it was usually at worst — it had forced him to draw on his mother's meagre store of good-will and capital. Since his mother was not one to give up a penny lightly, the Shop brought about a series of pitched battles which, however, always saw it the victor — since in the last analysis the Shop was to Mr. Appleby what Mr. Appleby was to his mother.

This unhappy triangle was finally shattered by his mother's death, at which time Mr. Appleby discovered that she had played a far greater role in maintaining his orderly little world than he had hitherto realized. This concerned not only the money she occasionally gave him, but also his personal habits.

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He ate lightly and warily. His mother had been adept at toasting and boiling his meals to perfection. His nerves were violently shaken if anything in the house was out of place, and she had been a living assurance he would be spared this. Her death, therefore, left a vast and uncomfortable gap in his life, and in studying methods to fill it he was led to contemplate marriage, and then to the act itself.

His wife was a pale, thin-lipped woman so much like his mother in appearance and gesture that sometimes on her entrance into a room he was taken aback by the resemblance. In only one respect did she fail him: she could not understand the significance of the Shop, nor his feelings about it. That was disclosed the first time he broached the subject of a small loan that would enable him to meet some business expenses.

Mrs. Appleby had been well in the process of withering on the vine when her husband-to-be had proposed to her, but to give her full due she was not won by the mere prospect of finally making a marriage. Actually, though she would have blushed at such a blunt statement of her secret thought, it was the large mournful eyes behind his rimless spectacles that turned the trick, promising, as they did, hidden depths of emotion neatly garbed in utter respectability. When she learned very soon after her wedding that the hidden depths were evidently too well hidden ever to be explored by her, she shrugged the matter off and turned to boiling and toasting his meals with good enough grace. The knowledge that the impressive *Appleby, Antiques and Curios* was a hollow shell she took in a different spirit.

She made some brisk investigations and then announced her findings to Mr. Appleby with some heat.

"Antiques and curios!" she said shrilly. "Why, that whole collection of stuff is nothing but a pile of junk. Just a bunch of worthless dust-catchers, that's all it is!"

What she did not understand was that these objects, which to the crass and commercial eye might seem worthless, were to Mr. Appleby the stuff of life itself. The Shop had grown directly from his childhood mania for collecting, assorting, labeling, and preserving anything he could lay his hands on. And the value of any item in the Shop increased proportionately with the length of time he possessed it; whether a cracked imitation of Sèvres, or clumsily faked Chippendale, or rusty sabre made no difference. Each piece had won a place for itself; a permanent, immutable place, as far as Mr. Appleby was concerned; and strangely enough it was the sincere agony he suffered in giving up a piece that led to the few sales he made. The customer who was uncertain of values had only to get a glimpse of this agony to be convinced that he was getting a rare bargain. Fortunately, no customer could have imagined for a moment that it was the thought of the empty space left by

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the object's departure — the brief disorder which the emptiness made — and not a passion for the object itself that drew Mr. Appleby's pinched features into a mask of pain.

So, not understanding, Mrs. Appleby took an unsympathetic tack. "You'll get my mite when I'm dead and gone," she said, "and only when I'm dead and gone."

Thus unwittingly she tried herself, was found wanting, and it only remained for sentence to be executed. When the time came Mr. Appleby applied the lessons he had gleaned from his invaluable textbook and found them accurate in every detail. It was over quickly, quietly, and, outside of a splash of water on his trousers, neatly. The Medical Examiner growled something about those indescribable scatter rugs costing more lives than drunken motorists; the policeman in charge kindly offered to do whatever he could in the way of making funeral arrangements; and that was all there was to it.

It had been so easy — so undramatic, in fact — that it was not until a week later when a properly sympathetic lawyer was making him an accounting of his wife's estate that Mr. Appleby suddenly understood the whole, magnificent new world that had been opened up to him.

Discretion must sometimes outweigh sentiment, and Mr. Appleby was, if anything, a discreet man. After his wife's estate had been cleared, the Shop was moved to another location far from its original setting. It was moved again after the sudden demise of the second Mrs. Appleby, and by the time the sixth Mrs. Appleby had been disposed of, the removals were merely part of a fruitful pattern.

Because of their similarities — they were all pale, thin-featured women with pinched lips, adept at toasting and boiling, and adamant on the subjects of regularity and order — Mr. Appleby was inclined to remember his departed wives rather vaguely *en masse.* Only in one regard did he qualify them: the number of digits their bank accounts totaled up to. For that reason he thought of the first two Mrs. Applebys as Fours; the third as a Three (an unpleasant surprise); and the last three as Fives. The sum would have been a pretty penny by anyone else's standards, but since each succeeding portion of it had been snapped up by the insatiable *Appleby, Antiques and Curios* — in much the way a fly is snapped up by a hungry lizard — Mr. Appleby found himself soon after the burial of the sixth Mrs. Appleby in deeper and warmer financial waters than ever. So desperate were his circumstances that although he dreamed of another Five he would have settled for a Four on the spot. It was at this opportune moment that Martha Sturgis entered his life, and after fifteen minutes conversation with her he brushed all thoughts of Fours and Fives from his mind.

Martha Sturgis, it seemed, was a Six.

It was not only in the extent of her fortune that she broke the pattern

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established by the women of Mr. Appleby's previous experience. Unlike them, Martha Sturgis was a large, rather shapeless woman who in person, dress, and manner might almost be called (Mr. Appleby shuddered a little at the word) blowsy.

It was remotely possible that properly veneered, harnessed, coiffured, and appareled she might have been made into something presentable, but from all indications Martha Sturgis was a woman who went out of her way to defy such conventions. Her hair, dyed a shocking orange-red, was piled carelessly on her head; her blobby features were recklessly powdered and painted entirely to their disadvantage; her clothes, obviously worn for comfort, were, at the same time, painfully garish; and her shoes gave evidence of long and pleasurable wear without corresponding care being given their upkeep.

Of all this and its effect on the beholder Martha Sturgis seemed totally unaware. She strode through *Appleby, Antiques and Curios* with an energy that set movable objects dancing in their places; she smoked incessantly, lighting one cigarette from another, while Mr. Appleby fanned the air before his face and coughed suggestively; and she talked without pause, loudly and in a deep, hoarse voice that dinned strangely in a Shop so accustomed to the higher, thinner note.

In the first fourteen minutes of their acquaintance the one quality she displayed that led Mr. Appleby to modify some of his immediate revulsion even a trifle was the care with which she priced each article. She examined, evaluated, and cross-examined in detail before moving on with obvious disapproval, and he moved along with her with mounting assurance that he could get her out of the Shop before any damage was done to the stock or his patience. And then in the fifteenth minute she spoke the Word.

"I've got half a million dollars in the bank," Martha Sturgis remarked with cheerful contempt, "but I never thought I'd get around to spending a nickel of it on this kind of stuff."

Mr. Appleby had his hand before his face preparatory to waving aside some of the tobacco smoke that eddied about him. In the time it took the hand to drop nervelessly to his side his mind attacked an astonishing number of problems. One concerned the important finger on her left hand which was ringless; the others concerned certain mathematical problems largely dealing with short-term notes, long-term notes, and rates of interest. By the time the hand touched his side, the problems, as far as Mr. Appleby was concerned, were well on the way to solution.

And it may be noted there was an added fillip given the matter by the very nature of Martha Sturgis's slovenly and strident being. Looking at her after she had spoken the Word, another man might perhaps have seen her through the sort of veil that a wise photographer casts over the lens of his camera in taking the picture of a

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prosperous, but unprepossessing, subject. Mr. Appleby, incapable of such self-deceit, girded himself instead with the example of the man who carried a heavy weight on his back for the pleasure it gave him in laying it down. Not only would the final act of a marriage to Martha Sturgis solve important mathematical problems, but it was an act he could play out with the gusto of a man ridding the world of an unpleasant object.

Therefore he turned his eyes, more melancholy and luminous than ever, on her and said, "It's a great pity, Mrs. . . ."

She told him her name, emphasizing the *Miss* before it, and Mr. Appleby smiled apologetically.

"Of course. As I was saying, it's a great pity when someone of refinement and culture — " (the *like yourself* floated delicately unsaid on the air) "— should never have known the joy in possession of fine works of art. But, as we all learn, it is never too late to begin, is it?"

Martha Sturgis looked at him sharply and then laughed a hearty bellow of laughter that stabbed his eardrums painfully. For a moment Mr. Appleby, a man not much given to humor, wondered darkly if he had unwittingly uttered something so excruciatingly epigrammatic that it was bound to have this alarming effect.

"My dear man," said Martha Sturgis, "if it is your idea that I am here to start cluttering up my life with your monstrosities, perish the thought. What I'm here for is to buy a gift for a friend, a thoroughly infuriating and loathesome person who happens to have the nature and disposition of a bar of stainless steel. I can't think of a better way of showing my feelings toward her than by presenting her with almost anything displayed in your shop. If possible, I should also like delivery arranged so that I can be on the scene when she receives the package."

Mr. Appleby staggered under this, then rallied valiantly. "In that case," he said, and shook his head firmly, "it is out of the question. Completely out of the question."

"Nonsense," Martha Sturgis said. "I'll arrange for delivery myself if you can't handle it. Really, you ought to understand that there's no point in doing this sort of thing unless you're on hand to watch the results."

Mr. Appleby kept tight rein on his temper. "I am not alluding to the matter of delivery," he said. "What I am trying to make clear is that I cannot possibly permit anything in my Shop to be bought in such a spirit. Not for any price you could name."

Martha Sturgis's heavy jaw dropped. "What was that you said?" she asked blankly.

It was a perilous moment, and Mr. Appleby knew it. His next words could set her off into another spasm of that awful laughter that would devastate him completely; or, worse, could send her right out of the Shop forever; or could decide the issue in his

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favor then and there. But it was a moment that had to be met, and, thought Mr. Appleby desperately, whatever else Martha Sturgis might be, she was a Woman.

He took a deep breath. "It is the policy of this Shop," he said quietly, "never to sell anything unless the prospective purchaser shows full appreciation for the article to be bought and can assure it the care and devotion to which it is entitled. That has always been the policy, and always will be as long as I am here. Anything other than that I would regard as desecration."

He watched Martha Sturgis with bated breath. There was a chair nearby, and she dropped into it heavily so that her skirts were drawn tight by her widespread thighs, and the obscene shoes were displayed mercilessly. She lit another cigarette, regarding him meanwhile with narrowed eyes through the flame of the match, and then fanned the air a little to dispel the cloud of smoke.

"You know," she said, "this is very interesting. I'd like to hear more about it."

To the inexperienced the problem of drawing information of the most personal nature from a total stranger would seem a perplexing one. To Mr. Appleby, whose interests had so often been dependent on such information, it was no problem at all. In very short time he had evidence that Martha Sturgis's estimate of her fortune was quite accurate, that she was apparently alone in the world without relatives or intimate friends, and — that she was not averse to the idea of marriage.

This last he drew from her during her now regular visits to the Shop where she would spread herself comfortably on a chair and talk to him endlessly. Much of her talk was about her father to whom Mr. Appleby evidently bore a striking resemblance.

"He even dressed like you," Martha Sturgis said reflectively. "Neat as a pin, and not only about himself either. He used to make an inspection of the house every day — march through and make sure everything was exactly where it had to be. And he kept it up right to the end. I remember an hour before he died how he went about straightening pictures on the wall."

Mr. Appleby who had been peering with some irritation at a picture that hung slightly awry on the Shop wall turned his attentions reluctantly from it.

"And you were with him to the end?" he asked sympathetically.

"Indeed I was."

"Well," Mr. Appleby said brightly, "one does deserve some reward for such sacrifice, doesn't one? Especially — and I hope this will not embarrass you, Miss Sturgis — when one considers that such a woman as yourself could undoubtedly have left the care of an aged father to enter matrimony almost at will. Isn't that so?"

Martha Sturgis sighed. "Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," she said, "and I won't deny that I've had my dreams.

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But that's all they are, and I suppose that's all they ever will be."

"Why?" asked Mr. Appleby encouragingly.

"Because," said Martha Sturgis sombrely, "I have never yet met the man who could fit those dreams. I am not a simpering schoolgirl, Mr. Appleby; I don't have to balance myself against my bank account to know why any man would devote himself to me, and, frankly, his motives would be of no interest. But he must be a decent respectable man who would spend every moment of his life worrying about me and caring for me; and he must be a man who would make the memory of my father a living thing."

Mr. Appleby rested a hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Miss Sturgis," he said gravely, "you may yet meet such a man."

She looked at him with features that were made even more blobby and unattractive by her emotion.

"Do you mean that, Mr. Appleby?" she asked. "Do you really believe that?"

Faith glowed in Mr. Appleby's eyes as he smiled down at her. "He may be closer than you dare realize," he said warmly.

Experience had proved to Mr. Appleby that once the ice is broken the best thing to do is take a deep breath and plunge in. Accordingly, he let very few days elapse before he made his proposal.

"Miss Sturgis," he said, "there comes a time to every lonely man when he can no longer bear his loneliness. If at such a time he is fortunate enough to meet the one woman to whom he could give unreservedly all his respect and tender feelings, he is a fortunate man indeed. Miss Sturgis — I am that man."

"Why, Mr. Appleby!" said Martha Sturgis, coloring a trifle. "That's really very good of you, but . . ."

At this note of indecision his heart sank. "Wait!" he interposed hastily. "If you have any doubts, Miss Sturgis, please speak them now so that I may answer them. Considering the state of my emotions, that would only be fair, wouldn't it?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Martha Sturgis. "You see, Mr. Appleby, I'd rather not get married at all than take the chance of getting someone who wasn't prepared to give me exactly what I'm looking for in marriage: absolute, single-minded devotion all the rest of my days."

"Miss Sturgis," said Mr. Appleby solemnly, "I am prepared to give you no less."

"Men say these things so easily," she sighed. "But — I shall certainly think about it, Mr. Appleby."

The dismal prospect of waiting an indefinite time for a woman of such careless habits to render a decision was not made any lighter by the sudden receipt a few days later of a note peremptorily requesting Mr. Appleby's presence at the offices of Gainsborough, Gainsborough, and Golding, attorneys-at-law. With his creditors closing in like a wolf pack, Mr.

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Appleby could only surmise the worst, and he was pleasantly surprised upon his arrival at Gainsborough, Gainsborough, and Golding to find that they represented, not his creditors, but Martha Sturgis herself.

The elder Gainsborough, obviously very much the guiding spirit of the firm, was a short, immensely fat man with pendulous dewlaps that almost concealed his collar, and large fishy eyes that goggled at Mr. Appleby. The younger Gainsborough was a duplicate of his brother with jowls not quite so impressive, while Golding was an impassive young man with a hatchet face.

"This," said the elder Gainsborough, his eyes fixed glassily on Mr. Appleby, "is a delicate matter. Miss Sturgis, an esteemed client —" the younger Gainsborough nodded at this "— has mentioned entering matrimony with you, sir."

Mr. Appleby sitting primly on his chair was stirred by a pleased excitement. "Yes?" he said.

"And," continued the elder Gainsborough, "while Miss Sturgis is perfectly willing to concede that her fortune may be the object of attraction in any suitor's eyes —" he held up a pudgy hand to cut short Mr. Appleby's shocked protest "— she is also willing to dismiss that issue —"

"To ignore it, set it aside," said the younger Gainsborough sternly.

"— if the suitor is prepared to meet all other expectations in marriage."

"I am," said Mr. Appleby fervently.

"Mr. Appleby," said the elder Gainsborough abruptly, "have you been married before?"

Mr. Appleby thought swiftly. Denial would make any chance word about his past a deadly trap; admission, on the other hand, was a safeguard against that, and a thoroughly respectable one.

"Yes," he said.

"Divorced?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Mr. Appleby, genuinely shocked.

The Gainsboroughs looked at each other in approval. "Good," said the elder; "very good. Perhaps, Mr. Appleby, the question seemed impertinent, but in these days of moral laxity . . ."

"I should like it known in that case," said Mr. Appleby sturdily, "that I am as far from moral laxity as any human being can be. Tobacco, strong drink, and — ah —"

"Loose women," said the younger Gainsborough briskly.

"Yes," said Mr. Appleby reddening; "are unknown to me."

The elder Gainsborough nodded. "Under any conditions," he said, "Miss Sturgis will not make any precipitate decision. She should have her answer for you within a month, however, and during that time, if you don't mind taking the advice of an old man, I suggest that you court her assiduously. She is a woman, Mr. Appleby, and I imagine that all women are much alike."

"I imagine they are," said Mr. Appleby.

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"Devotion," said the younger Gainsborough. "Constancy. That's the ticket."

What he was being asked to do, Mr. Appleby reflected in one of his solitary moments, was to put aside the Shop and the orderly world it represented and to set the unappealing figure of Martha Sturgis in its place. It was a temporary measure, of course; it was one that would prove richly rewarding when Martha Sturgis had been properly wed and sent the way of the preceding Mrs. Applebys; but it was not made any easier by enforced familiarity with the woman. It was inevitable that since Mr. Appleby viewed matters not only as a prospective bridegroom, but also as a prospective widower, so to speak, he found his teeth constantly set on edge by the unwitting irony which crept into so many of her tedious discussions on marriage.

"The way I see it," Martha Sturgis once remarked, "is that a man who would divorce his wife would divorce any other woman he ever married. You take a look at all these broken marriages today, and I'll bet that in practically every case you'll find a man who's always shopping around and never finding what he wants. Now, the man *I* marry," she said pointedly, "must be willing to settle down and stay settled."

"Of course," said Mr. Appleby.

"I have heard," Martha Sturgis told him on another, and particularly trying, occasion, "that a satisfactory marriage increases a woman's span of years. That's an excellent argument for marriage, don't you think?"

"Of course," said Mr. Appleby.

It seemed to him that during that month of trial most of his conversation was restricted to the single phrase "of course," delivered with varying inflections; but the tactic must have been the proper one since at the end of the month he was able to change the formula to "I do," in a wedding ceremony at which Gainsborough, Gainsborough, and Golding were the sole guests.

Immediately afterward, Mr. Appleby (to his discomfort) was borne off with his bride to a photographer's shop where innumerable pictures were made under the supervision of the dour Golding, following which, Mr. Appleby (to his delight) exchanged documents with his wife which made them each other's heirs to all properties, possessions, *et cetera*, whatsoever.

If Mr. Appleby had occasionally appeared rather abstracted during these festivities, it was only because his mind was neatly arranging the program of impending events. The rug (the very same one that had served so well in six previous episodes) had to be placed; and then there would come the moment when he would ask for a glass of water, when he would place one hand on her shoulder, and with the other . . . It could not be a moment that took place without due time passing; yet it could not be forestalled too long in view of the pressure exercised by the Shop's

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voracious creditors. Watching the pen in his wife's hand as she signed her will, he decided there would be time within a few weeks. With the will in his possession there would be no point in waiting longer than that.

Before the first of those weeks was up, however, Mr. Appleby knew that even this estimate would have to undergo drastic revision. There was no question about it: he was simply not equipped to cope with his marriage.

For one thing, her home (and now his), a brownstone cavern inherited from her mother, was a nightmare of disorder. On the principle, perhaps, that anything flung casually aside was not worth picking up since it would only be flung aside again, an amazing litter had accumulated in every room. The contents of brimming closets and drawers were recklessly exchanged, mislaid, or added to the general litter, and over all lay a thin film of dust. On Mr. Appleby's quivering nervous system all this had the effect of a fingernail dragging along an endless blackboard.

The one task to which Mrs. Appleby devoted herself, as it happened, was the one which her husband prayerfully wished she would spare herself. She doted on cookery, and during mealtimes would trudge back and forth endlessly between kitchen and dining-room laden with dishes outside any of Mr. Appleby's experience.

At his first feeble protests his wife had taken pains to explain in precise terms that she was sensitive to any criticism of her cooking, even the implied criticism of a partly emptied plate; and, thereafter, Mr. Appleby, plunging hopelessly through rare meats, rich sauces, and heavy pastries, found added to his tribulations the incessant pangs of dyspepsia. Nor were his pains eased by his wife's insistence that he prove himself a trencherman of her mettle. She would thrust plates heaped high with indigestibles under his quivering nose, and, bracing himself like a martyr facing the lions, Mr. Appleby would empty his portion into a digestive tract that cried for simple fare properly boiled or toasted.

It became one of his fondest waking dreams, that scene where he returned from his wife's burial to dine on hot tea and toast and, perhaps, a medium-boiled egg. But even that dream and its sequel — where he proceeded to set the house in order — were not sufficient to buoy him up each day when he awoke and reflected on what lay ahead of him.

Each day found his wife more insistent in her demands for his attentions. And on that day when she openly reproved him for devoting more of those attentions to the Shop than to herself, Mr. Appleby knew the time had come to prepare for the final act. He brought home the rug that evening and carefully laid it in place between the living room and the hallway that led to the kitchen. Martha Appleby watched him without any great enthusiasm.

"That's a shabby looking thing,

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all right," she said. "What is it, Appie, an antique or something?"

She had taken to calling him by that atrocious name and seemed cheerfully oblivious to the way he winced under it. He winced now.

"It is not an antique," Mr. Appleby admitted, "but I hold it dear for many reasons. It has a great deal of sentimental value to me."

Mrs. Appleby smiled fondly at him. "And you brought it for me, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Appleby, "I did."

"You're a dear," said Mrs. Appleby. "You really are."

Watching her cross the rug on slipshod feet to use the telephone, which stood on a small table the other side of the hallway, Mr. Appleby toyed with the idea that since she used the telephone at about the same time every evening he could schedule the accident for that time. The advantages were obvious: since those calls seemed to be the only routine she observed with any fidelity, she would cross the rug at a certain time, and he would be in a position to settle matters then and there.

However, thought Mr. Appleby as he polished his spectacles, that brought up the problem of how best to approach her under such circumstances. Clearly the tried and tested methods were best, but if the telephone call and the glass of water could be synchronized . . .

"A penny for your thoughts, Appie," said Mrs. Appleby brightly. She had laid down the telephone and crossed the hallway so that she stood squarely on the rug. Mr. Appleby replaced his spectacles and peered at her through them.

"I wish," he said querulously, "you would not address me by that horrid name. You know I detest it."

"Nonsense," his wife said briefly. "I think it's cute."

"I do not."

"Well, I like it," said Mrs. Appleby with the air of one who has settled a matter once and for all. "Anyhow," she pouted, "That couldn't have been what you were thinking about before I started talking to you, could it?"

It struck Mr. Appleby that when this stout, unkempt woman pouted, she resembled nothing so much as a wax doll badly worn by time and handling. He pushed away the thought to frame some suitable answer.

"As it happens," he said, "my mind was on the disgraceful state of my clothes. Need I remind you again that there are buttons missing from practically every garment I own?"

Mrs. Appleby yawned broadly. "I'll get to it sooner or later."

"Tomorrow perhaps?"

"I doubt it," said Mrs. Appleby. She turned toward the stairs. "Come to sleep, Appie. I'm dead tired."

Mr. Appleby followed her thoughtfully. Tomorrow, he knew, he would have to get one of his suits to the tailor if he wanted to have anything fit to wear at the funeral.

He had brought home the suit and hung it neatly away; he had eaten his

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dinner; and he had sat in the living room listening to his wife's hoarse voice go on for what seemed interminable hours, although the clock was not yet at nine.

Now with rising excitement he saw her lift herself slowly from her chair and cross the room to the hallway. As she reached for the telephone Mr. Appleby cleared his throat sharply. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'd like a glass of water."

Mrs. Appleby turned to look at him. "A glass of water?"

"If you don't mind," said Mr. Appleby, and waited as she hesitated, then set down the telephone, and turned toward the kitchen. There was the sound of a glass being rinsed in the kitchen, and then Mrs. Appleby came up to him holding it out. He laid one hand appreciatively on her plump shoulder, and then lifted the other as if to brush back a strand of untidy hair at her cheek.

"Is that what happened to all the others?" said Mrs. Appleby quietly.

Mr. Appleby felt his hand freeze in mid-air and the chill from it run down into his marrow. "Others?" he managed to say. "What others?"

His wife smiled grimly at him, and he saw that the glass of water in her hand was perfectly steady. "Six others," she said. "That is, six by my count. Why? Were there any more?"

"No," he said, then caught wildly at himself. "I don't understand what you're talking about!"

"Dear Appie. Surely you couldn't forget six wives just like that. Unless, of course, I've come to mean so much to you that you can't bear to think of the others. That would be a lovely thing to happen, wouldn't it?"

"I *was* married before," Mr. Appleby said loudly. "I made that quite clear myself. But this talk about six wives!"

"Of course you were married before, Appie. And it was quite easy to find out to whom — and it was just as easy to find out about the one before that — and all the others. Or even about your mother, or where you went to school, or where you were born. You see, Appie, Mr. Gainsborough is really a very clever man."

"Then it was Gainsborough who put you up to this!"

"Not at all, you foolish little man," his wife said contemptuously. "All the time you were making your plans I was unmaking them. From the moment I laid eyes on you I knew you for what you are. Does that surprise you?"

Mr. Appleby struggled with the emotions of a man who has picked up a twig to find a viper in his hand. "How could you know?" he gasped.

"Because you were the image of my father. Because in everything — the way you dress, your insufferable neatness, your priggish arrogance, the little moral lectures you dote on — you are what he was. And all my life I hated him for what he was, and what it did to my mother. He married her for her money, made her every day a nightmare, and then killed her for what was left of her fortune."

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"Killed her?" said Mr. Appleby, stupefied.

"Oh, come," his wife said sharply. "Do you think you're the only man who was ever capable of that? Yes, he killed her — murdered her, if you prefer — by asking for a glass of water, and then breaking her neck when she offered it to him. A method strangely similar to yours, isn't it?"

Mr. Appleby found the incredible answer rising to his mind, but refused to accept it. "What happened to him?" he demanded. "Tell me, what happened! Was he caught?"

"No, he was never caught. There were no witnesses to what he did, but Mr. Gainsborough had been my mother's lawyer, a dear friend of hers. He had suspicions and demanded a hearing. He brought a doctor to the hearing who made it plain how my father could have killed her and made it look as if she had slipped on a rug, but before there was any decision my father died of a heart attack."

"That was the case — the case I read!" Mr. Appleby groaned, and then was silent under his wife's sardonic regard.

"When he was gone," she went on inexorably, "I swore I would some day find a man exactly like him, and I would make that man live the life my father should have lived. I would know his every habit and every taste, and none of them should go satisfied. I would know he married me for my money, and he would never get a penny of it until I was dead and gone. And that would be a long, long time, because he would spend his life taking care that I should live out my life to the last possible breath."

Mr. Appleby pulled his wits together, and saw that despite her emotion she had remained in the same position. "How can you make him do that?" he asked softly, and moved an inch closer.

"It does sound strange, doesn't it, Appie?" she observed. "But hardly as strange as the fact that your six wives died by slipping on a rug — very much like this one — while bringing you a glass of water — very much like this one. So strange, that Mr. Gainsborough was led to remark that too many coincidences will certainly hang a man. Especially if there is reason to bring them to light in a trial for murder."

Mr. Appleby suddenly found the constriction of his collar unbearable. "That doesn't answer my question," he said craftily. "How can you make sure that I would devote my life to prolonging yours?"

"A man whose wife is in a position to have him hanged should be able to see that clearly."

"No," said Mr. Appleby in a stifled voice, "I only see that such a man is forced to rid himself of his wife as quickly as possible."

"Ah, but that's where the arrangements come in."

"Arrangements? What arrangements?" demanded Mr. Appleby.

"I'd like very much to explain them," his wife said. "In fact, I see the time has come when it's imperative

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to do so. But I do find it uncomfortable standing here like this."

"Never mind that," said Mr. Appleby impatiently, and his wife shrugged.

"Well, then," she said coolly, "Mr. Gainsborough now has all the documents about your marriages — the way the previous deaths took place, the way you always happened to get the bequests at just the right moment to pay your shop's debts.

"Besides this, he has a letter from me, explaining that in the event of my death an investigation be made immediately and all necessary action be taken. Mr. Gainsborough is really very efficient. The fingerprints and photographs . . ."

"Fingerprints and photographs!" cried Mr. Appleby.

"Of course. After my father's death it was found that he had made all preparations for a quick trip abroad. Mr. Gainsborough has assured me that in case you had such ideas in mind you should get rid of them. No matter where you are, he said, it will be quite easy to bring you back again."

"What do you want of me?" asked Mr. Appleby numbly. "Surely you don't expect me to stay now, and —"

"Oh, yes, I do. And since we've come to this point I may as well tell you I expect you to give up your useless shop once and for all, and make it a point to be at home with me the entire day."

"Give up the Shop!" he exclaimed. "You must remember, Appie, that in my letter asking for a full investigation at my death, I did not specify death by any particular means. I look forward to a long and pleasant life with you always at my side, and perhaps — mind you, I only say *perhaps* — some day I shall turn over that letter and all the evidence to you. You can see how much it is to your interest, therefore, to watch over me very carefully."

The telephone rang with abrupt violence, and Mrs. Appleby nodded toward it. "Almost as carefully," she said softly, "as Mr. Gainsborough. Unless I call him every evening at nine to report I am well and happy, it seems he will jump to the most shocking conclusions."

"Wait," said Mr. Appleby. He lifted the telephone, and there was no mistaking the voice that spoke.

"Hello," said the elder Gainsborough. "Hello, Mrs. Appleby?"

Mr. Appleby essayed a cunning move. "No," he said, "I'm afraid she can't speak to you now. What is it?"

The voice in his ear took on an unmistakable cold menace. "This is Gainsborough, Mr. Appleby, and I wish to speak to your wife immediately. I will give you ten seconds to have her at this telephone, Mr. Appleby. Do you understand?"

Mr. Appleby turned dully toward his wife and held out the telephone. "It's for you," he said, and then saw with a start of terror that as she turned to set down the glass of water the rug skidded slightly under her feet. Her arms flailed the air as she

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fought for balance, the glass smashed at his feet drenching his neat trousers, and her face twisted into a silent scream. Then her body struck the floor and lay inertly in the position with which he was so familiar.

Watching her, he was barely conscious of the voice emerging tinnily from the telephone in his hand.

"The ten seconds are up, Mr. Appleby," it said shrilly. "Do you understand? *Your time is up!*"

It is always interesting, we think, to ponder the Original Causes of a literary work — at least, insofar as the author can recall them, "on sombre reflection" . . . Mr. Ellin wrote us that if the Appleby story has no other distinction (modest man!), it is the first story whose background and origin he can remember instantaneously. Mr. Ellin, it seems, came upon William Bolitho's wonderful book on mass murderers, MURDER FOR PROFIT, *only a year or two ago. (Ruefully, Mr. Ellin wonders why he is always discovering magnificent books a little later than everyone else; most of us, Stanley, are 'tec tortoises — except that we do not confess it so readily.) Anyway, while reading* MURDER FOR PROFIT, *Mr. Ellin was struck by the way in which most of the victims practically begged for destruction. "There is hardly a dupe in the carload who didn't do everything but sign the receipt for his body from the morgue."*

The inevitable thought which followed, according to Mr. Ellin, envisioned a dupe who refused to cooperate in his own murder. This thought was succeeded, with equal inevitability, by the conception of a dupe who had his own axe to grind. Thus, the creative processes . . .

Would-be writers, and many experienced writers, should find a significant lesson in these disclosures. Mr. Ellin discovered his source material in real life, one step removed; but the fascinating part of the lesson is how Mr. Ellin handled the source material, how he fashioned it into fiction, completely changed yet completely controlled by his own creative consciousness.

Yes, "murder for profit" can be channeled into "writing for profit" and "reading for profit" — with incalculable benefits to society at large. To quote George Bernard Shaw, fiction enables people to read about crimes instead of going out into the streets and committing them. Writing about crimes serves the same desirable function. Reading and writing about crimes does not make us criminals, but rather, in Bernard Shaw's own words, "causes any propensities we may have in that direction to waste themselves harmlessly through the imagination."

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THE INITIALED CASE

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

JIM? This is Harvey Pawson." The voice on the telephone was strident with emotion. "Can you come over to my place — right away?"

Detective-sergeant Jim Wilder glanced at his watch. Seven thirty. Pawson wasn't a bad guy, and Wilder liked to do favors for his friends. Still, he had his shoes off and was looking forward to a quiet evening at home. It had been raining steadily ever since he left the police station at six o'clock.

"Well, I don't know, Harvey," Wilder began.

"Something awful has happened, Jim!" Pawson's voice was insistent. "Marge is dead. I just came home and found her — killed!"

"Good Lord, I —!" Wilder kicked off his slippers. "Okay, Harvey, I'll be right over."

The rhythm of the windshield wiper paced the detective's thoughts as he drove to Pawson's suburban home. So Marge was dead. He was not greatly surprised. He had half-expected something of the sort ever since that unsavory gossip columnist had linked Marge's name with that of an equally unsavory refugee marquis named George de Brissot. Harvey was young, well-heeled, jealous, and very much in love with Marge. Marge was young, beautiful, and very much in love with life and the security Harvey's comfortable fortune represented. George de Brissot was handsome, sophisticated, and dripping with Continental charm. According to the gossips, he, too, was madly in love with Marge, although Wilder had suspected he had been equally infatuated with the Pawson money. With a taut triangle like that, something was bound to snap . . .

Harvey Pawson's sleek coupe, spangled with rain, stood at the curb as the detective reached his destination. Wilder crossed the lawn and rang the bell. Pawson opened the door immediately. His blue eyes were haggard, his reddish hair disheveled.

The detective walked in. Without taking off his hat or coat he silently followed Pawson to the living room. Marge Pawson was lying across the divan, her scarlet negligee torn, her ash-blonde hair fanned across the back of the settee. Her face was mottled with purple. There were ugly dark marks on her velvety throat.

"Strangled," said Wilder.

"I haven't touched anything — yet," Pawson said. "Look, Jim. This is why I called you." Pawson pointed to something on the coffee table. "Suppose I get rid of that? After all, she's dead now, and a scandal won't bring her back to life."

The detective bent over the table.

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Lying beside two empty cocktail glasses was a silver cigarette case, inlaid with a gold coat-of-arms. One corner of the case was engraved with the initials, *G. de B.*

"Was Brissot here this afternoon?" Wilder asked.

"Yes. Marge phoned me to come home early. She said the Marquis was getting nasty because she wouldn't run away with him. I wish I'd taken her seriously, but there was a directors' meeting —"

"Was Brissot here when you arrived?" Wilder asked.

"No, he'd gone. Marge was — just as she is now. Lord knows what would have happened if I'd found them together."

"I think I know." The detective stared at the body on the divan. "You'd have killed them both. You've got a redhead's temper, Harvey."

Pawson buried his face in his hands. "Why did this skunk have to wreck my life?" he moaned.

"What time did you get home?" Wilder asked.

"Two minutes before I called you, Jim."

"That was seven thirty. Where does Brissot live?"

"Don't, Jim. I'd rather not —"

"Come on, Harvey. I know he lives near here. You'll drive us."

Pawson started the motor as Wilder slid into the seat beside him. The detective stared at the rear-vision mirror as the car moved away from the curb. When they had gone twenty feet, Wilder's foot jabbed at the brake. The motor coughed and died. Handcuffs flashed on Pawson's wrists.

"Jim!" Pawson protested. "Are you crazy?"

"Brissot didn't leave that cigarette case at your house this afternoon, Harvey. He must have left it on some previous visit. Because this afternoon he was arrested for passing a bum check in your wife's name. I was going to call you about it tomorrow."

"But what's that got to do with me, Jim?"

"I'm sorry, Harvey, but this is murder. And this case has *your* initials on it. You've been lying to me. You told me you got home at seven thirty," the detective said. "But it started raining at six. Look back, Harvey."

Harvey Pawson turned his head. In the midst of the dark, wet gleam of the pavement, there was a clean, dry, pale oblong where his car had been standing. . . .

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That wild, extravagant, swashbuckling Irish-American, Donn Byrne, published his first book — STORIES WITHOUT WOMEN — in 1915. Today a first edition of that distinguished volume of short stories is the rarest of all Donn Byrne books. And why not? Faith and begorra, a mere handful were distributed — even in 1915 you could not interest the reading public in a book of short stories, and an author's first book at that. It is a matter of pitiful publishing record that only 639 copies were sold, and of these the author himself bought 13. The faith-and-begorra wonder of it all is that Donn Byrne was not discouraged to death — for surely he did not earn $100 on the original edition of his first published work. Less than $100 — think of it! Even at the 1915 cost-of-living those book earnings did not keep a man and his family more than a half-step ahead of the wolf.

But luckily the popular magazines of the day liked Donn Byrne's short stories. With his fourth book — the now-famous MESSER MARCO POLO, published in 1921 — Donn Byrne became a shining literary light. But midway between the candlelight obscurity of 1915 and the beacon brilliance of 1921 Donn Byrne was a highly paid magazine writer. For example, in December 1918 he signed a contract with Hearst Publications to supply one short story per month for the entire year of 1919.

Here is a story by Donn Byrne written a little more than a year before he achieved the Hearst contract. It is one of the heart-warming, human interest tales which actually led to that contract . . .

AN INFRINGEMENT OF THE DECALOGUE

by DONN BYRNE

WHEN Bertrand Lacy, gambler, wastrel, and blackguard generally, deserted his wife Nan, aged eighteen, and his son Norman, aged three weeks, in New York, there was no limit to the pity people extended to her.

"And he left her without a cent in the world!" they whispered in the boarding-house. "He even pawned her jewelry!"

"Of course she will go back to her people in Ireland," the wiseacres decided for her. "She has them to fall back on."

But here the wise erred. She had not them to fall back on. When Bertrand Lacy had come to Galway, hardly over a year before, and when he and Nan Burke-Keogh met, fell in love with each other, and courted, they had done everything surrepti-

From "A Woman of the Shee," by Donn Byrne. Copyright, 1932, by the Century Company. Reprinted by permission of Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.

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tiously. From New York had Lacy come, according to him, in a haze of glory. His business in New York was vague and his pedigree vaguer. The man knew horses. He knew the points of flat and steeplechase racing, of hunting, of harriers. These things he might have picked up about race-courses and about dog-shows, to be sure, but the impression he gave was that he had been accustomed to them as a sportsman, not as a hanger-on.

At Baldoyle he had met some of the newer generation of gentility, honest tradesfolk who should have been harvesting the fruits of commerce in place of squandering it on a sport they could neither afford nor understand. His knowledge of horses stood him in good stead. It provided him with a comfortable sum for summer expenses, some introductions, and an invitation to spend a month in Galway.

"We'll show you sport the like of which you never saw in America, when we get you after the harriers," his host, a wealthy brewer, told him. And so Lacy went.

In Dublin it would have been impossible for him to meet, without a proper investigation of his antecedents, Nan, daughter of Sir Michael Burke-Keogh, that fierce old fox-hunter with the most terrible temper in Ireland. But Galway is a sleepy city, basking like a kitten in the sun, with boats drowsing along the stone quays, and strange, silent country people coming in from the purple Connaught hills. Life is empty there, and social barriers are not strictly kept. At the hunt Lacy met her, and later at the houses around, where he had secured a casual entry. Her father he never met, nor wished to meet. The old man's bushy eyebrows and granite eyes beneath, as he saw them in the distance, warned him that here was an examiner who could probe like a lancet.

The very surreptitiousness of it all captured her, as well as Lacy's appearance and his potent way with women. Not a tall man, by any means, but stocky and well built; a clear face, with waving ruddy hair and chestnut eyes; a cleft chin and a voice that was soothing like music. And there was an eternal quizzing smile on his face that hinted at superior knowledge of the world, of women, of life.

I think he must have been very much in love with her, or taken with her, as the case might be better put. She was a very small and lithe woman, with quick, incisive gestures. Her hair was misty black, and her eyes were nearly too large for her face, and very gray. Her nose and nostrils had the clean cut of race. Her mouth might have been cut by a sculptor's scalpel, so well shaped and firm it seemed; and she was only seventeen. She was a very beautiful woman then, was Nan Burke-Keogh of Galway, and she is now, twenty-three years later, and she will be until the day she dies.

They met. They rode and boated together. They danced together at the hunt balls. He swept her off her

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feet by the impetuousness of his love-making.

"I love you, Nan, little Nan," he told her. They were on the terrace of the club, and from where they stood they could see the glistening Atlantic waves shimmering under the harvest moon. The dancers within were waltzing rhythmically, a delicate kaleidoscope of frocks and uniforms and red hunting-coats. The band breathed out a dreamy waltz of Strauss, and mingling with the rippling music came the languorous murmur of the waves.

"Little Nan, will you come away with me to America? Will you marry me, and fly over? Will you, little Nan?"

"What will Father say?" She was fearful.

"Listen, little Nan," he pressed eagerly. "We won't tell him until everything is over. Let's not have a wedding with a crowd at church. Let's go off. I want to sweep you away. I want to carry you off in my arms, right here, right now."

"But Father . . ." She hesitated.

"Your father will come around!" he told her. "Don't fear. Come, little Nan, little Nan!"

She thought for an instant, and by some measure of intuition she knew that her father would never give his consent to her marriage with this man; and that if she loved him and wanted him she must listen to his wooing now.

"My father will never come around," she said simply. She swept about to him, and her hands went out. "But I will come with you and follow you to the end of the world. And you will be good to me and take care of me, won't you, Bertrand, won't you?"

"I will take care of you and cherish you until the end of the world!"

"Then I will come," she decided.

That very night she came, and on the morrow they were married in Dublin, and on the next day were flying toward America. There was not much reason to fly, however, for Sir Michael Burke-Keogh had no intention of following them. He contented himself with a terrible outburst of temper, in which he cursed her solemnly by bell, book, and candle; disinherited her; erased her name from the family records. Then his mouth closed forever into a grim, thin line. When a priest came to inform him of the marriage, he turned on the father with a roar as of a maddened bull.

"My daughter married!" he shouted. "My daughter! If you mean the slut who ran away with somebody's cast-off groom, let me tell you, sir, that she is no daughter of mine. No woman of our house has ever done a thing like that before; and when she does, she is dead!"

Little by little she came to understand the manner of man she had married, and, loyal heart that she was, might have condoned his way of livelihood had he kept up his love for her. Imperceptibly it waned until it was no longer there. They traveled about the race-tracks of the South and

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West for nearly a year. Luck deserted him, and he grew irritable. They were in New York when their son was about to be born, and at their lowest ebb for money.

"Cable to your father, Nan," was his eternal plea. "If he knows, he'll be glad to help you out."

He reasoned, he cajoled, he threatened, and about this time her lips began to curl into a faint sneer as she heard him whine. She could have borne much in him — his dissoluteness, his dishonesty even — but one thing she could not bear, and that was the whine, the cowardice of him.

Their son was born, and as he lay in her arms a few days after, the father made an attempt to bluster.

"Now, look here, Nan!" he told her. "You've got to be sensible. You'll send that cable. Tell him he has a grandson. That will soften him."

She said nothing. She looked at him searchingly, probingly, with her great blue-lined eyes standing out in her wan white face like dead stars. At last he saw the futility of it. He paced about the room.

"Curse you!" he raved. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd have never been in this mess. If I hadn't married you, I'd have been having a good time now, instead of being broke in this dump." He paced about more and suddenly he quailed before the glance in the haggard, shadowy eyes. "What are you looking at me like that for?" he ended weakly. "Take your eyes off me!"

A fortnight after that he left her. He had gone out in the morning, and returned about eleven — two hours later. He walked into the dingy room, carelessly humming a tune, but there was something tense and nervous about him. He glanced at her, and he glanced at the child sleeping on the bed.

"I think I'll drop around to the corner for a couple of minutes before lunch," he hazarded. He opened the bureau drawer and extracted the last few dollars from it. "Ahum! Yes! I think I'll drop around." And he sauntered out.

And that was the last Nan saw of Bertrand Lacy, living or dead.

Her heart was broken. It had been broken long before this, although she had said nothing. But if her heart was broken, her spirit wasn't. It was as vital in her at that moment as it had been in any of the Burke-Keoghs who had sailed out of Galway into Spain, resilient as whalebone, strong as steel.

She sat and she thought for a while in that grim and sordid room, with the child sleeping peacefully on the bed; and her brain operated as clearly then as it has ever operated since, more clearly than it had ever done before. Here she was, an abandoned wife, with a child not a month old, with not a cent of money, and with little that was pawnable. What was she to do? She couldn't go back to her father: he would have her whipped from the gates. And what was more, she wouldn't if she could, for she had made her own bed and she would lie

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on it! Below, the people of the house might extend her charity, but she suspected shrewdly how impatient and overbearing charity can be. Besides, she would have none of it were it the kindest thing in the world.

She put her coat on with quick decision. She put her hat on. She requested a fellow-lodger — a hard-faced little circus woman whose heart belied the aggressive glint in her eyes — to mind the baby until she returned.

"I'll be a half-hour at most," she said, and she went down the dingy brownstone steps with her head high, as a queen might descend the steps of a throne.

There was a great department store around the corner, and she swept into it. Because she was a lady, and because she had that firm, commanding way of the Burke-Keoghs, when she asked to see the manager she was led to him. A kindly, shrewd-eyed, fleshy man, he took in every detail about her, from the well-worn but well-brushed suit to the proud tilt of her head and the firm command in her eyes. He noticed too, in an impersonal way, how beautiful she was, even with her features as wan and haggard as they now were.

"What can I do for you, madam?" he asked courteously.

"You can give me something to do," she told him. "I want work."

"Yes," he said, without apparent surprise. "Is there any particular thing you could do?"

"I know a great deal about lace," she answered. "I was once told I knew more about it than any person in Europe."

Which was true, large as it sounds. As far back as Nan Burke-Keogh's mind could go, she could remember her mother's pride in it, and how the dear lady had tried to instill a love into her for the filmy, web-like fabrics. At the convent in Malines the sisters had encouraged her in the study of it. When other children were deep in the delights of innocuous love-stories, she was following with an appreciative eye the stars and circles, the whorls, the lunes, the bars, the arabesques of laces done by the delicate fingers of noblewomen now dead, and the fresh products of patient peasants. Those were Nan's two accomplishments — her knowledge of laces and her horsemanship.

"Would you mind telling me," she was asked, "why you want to work?"

"A very private matter," she answered proudly, "and because I have to."

He sent for a silent, dapper man, who talked to her of work, questioning her minutely, without seeming to do so, about what she knew. The fleshy manager rose.

"I think we might arrange something," he decided.

This is not the chronicle of Nan Lacy's success in the business world. I know nothing about business and I care less. I am not interested in the various steps by which she rose from a twenty-dollar-a-week position to a salary of fifteen thousand a year. It

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suffices me that she did so. She rose to danger like a thing of race, and smashed all obstacles aside, like a blooded hunter at the touch of the spur.

And this was not the only obstacle in her way. There was the question of Norman Lacy, aged one month. What was to become of him, now that she was earning her own living? She could not keep him by her. In that one electric day of clear thought she accomplished everything. She found a pair of ladies in Sheepshead Bay who were delighted to take care of him, for a nominal board bill, so empty their lives were. For two years she lived out there with him, looking after him at night, and leaving him in the morning, to come in to her business. At the age of two he began to show signs of wilfulness that filled the old ladies' hearts with dread, much as they loved him.

"God grant he won't be a heartsore to her when he grows up!" they prayed fervently.

There came the time later when her rise had been such as to warrant the leasing of an apartment and the hire of cook and nurse. At five the qualities the child had shown at two had strengthened and diversified. He seemed full of ebullient, uncontrollable spirits that nearly always resulted in mischief. He was ready with fists and feet. He had a mania for breaking things.

She was twenty-five now, and yet, except for the quietness of her eyes that should have been sparkling with laughter, she seemed little older than the day she left Galway. The color had never gone from her cheeks, and she took an honest, womanly pride in her beauty, though the thought of another husband had never entered her mind; and, moreover, there was always the possibility of the first turning up again, and claiming her. If he did — her eyes glinted with sudden savageness — she would thrash him with her riding-crop until he screamed for mercy, and she would cast him out into the street, like the most unfaithful of mongrel dogs!

So, unmindful of any man save the first, for whom she had nothing but the utmost loathing, she went her way, sufficient unto herself. She took care of her beauty, and took care of her health. She could ride now that the yoke of want had been raised from her neck, and Saturday afternoon and Sunday would see her whirling through Westchester country on a great hunter, like an Amazon going into battle. She walked through the streets with her head high, her shoulders straight, her stride swinging and rhythmic. And there was no man she knew who did not admire her, and there were many who loved her, but there were none who dared speak to her of it, because of that aloof and magnificently chaste expression of her eyes.

"My Lord!" Bahr, the advertising manager, used to mutter to himself. "To think that that woman was married, and had a child by a scoundrel! She looks like one of Diana's at-

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tendants; like Diana herself, begad!"

She understood the boy, and she felt, intuitively, that the boy understood her. There were very few demonstrations of affection between them, but there was a bond, a sort of friendliness, a manner of comradeship. Those about her did not understand this. At eight he was sent to a military school in the South. He shook hands with her in a manly way, and blushed when she stooped to kiss him. Then he was off.

"And not a tear in his eye!" a woman friend thought to herself. "The hard-hearted little beast! She need never depend on him when she grows old."

And so years slipped onward. For her they went by like one mellow day after another, sunset verging into sunrise, and the sands of the hour-glass rippling silverly until the sun dropped again. More intent still she became on her work, until there was nothing of space left in her time which was not taken up by business, and her riding and swimming, and the reading of letters from and reports of her boy at school.

From an educational point of view these reports were not very encouraging. "He is the sturdiest lad in the school," so they went, "honest and honorable, but nearly beyond control. His knowledge of books is disgraceful. The only interest he has is athletics. A great pity!" But she only smiled.

He would come home at the end of the year laden with athletic trophies, with cups and medals. These he distributed about the apartment. He never formally gave them to her or mentioned them, but she knew they were for her.

At eighteen she broached to him the subject of college. He shook his head.

"I'm not keen on it," he said casually. "I've been casting about for something to do. A man I know has a place down in Ecuador — a sort of mine or something. Thought I'd like to have a go at that."

She looked at him a little wistfully, but she smiled. So he was a man now, eager for adventure and life! How like his father he looked in feature, she thought. The same rippling chestnut hair; the light-brown eyes; the straight nose; the cleft chin. There the resemblance ceased. Where his father had been short and stocky, with small, delicate hands, the son was well over six feet, with hands that seemed gigantic, broadened and hardened by glove contests, by hockey stick and polo mallet. Other people were shocked by his prowess in the amateur ring: it was said he could knock an opponent out with the ease of a professional heavyweight, but somehow she was glad. There were other things of his father's he did not inherit. He had not his father's uneasy eyes; he had not his father's flow of speech and musical voice. His speech was casual; his voice rough.

"If you think that's the best thing," she told him, "then go."

He did think so, and he went. But

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the fortune at the end of the rainbow did not reveal itself to him. For four years he tramped up and down the world, returning home at intervals of six months — except for fifteen months in Africa — and bringing with him sufficient money to tide him over a month at home and to pay his fare overseas again. He had never any luck in his ventures. Once it was the mine in Ecuador, and once a banana plantation partnership in Colombia, and once a game-capturing expedition in the Congo, but none of them came to anything. Yet he never complained. He would come back with weird presents for his mother; spears and arrows from the Congo; a compressed human head from the waters of the Maranon; fifty aigrette feathers from Colombia. He was arrested for attempting to smuggle in these last, and it took the combined influence of fifty million dollars' worth of money to have him released on the ground that he was a harmless lunatic.

And every time he returned she watched him with continuously growing pride. He was only twenty-two now, but he had broadened and filled, and he might have been thirty, so self-reliant he seemed, and so firm and challenging was his eye. His face was tanned to the color of leather, and the huge hands had become clubs of brown sinew and muscle.

When they stood side by side they seemed like sister and brother. It would have been impossible for anyone not aware of the facts to suppose them mother and son. She was forty now, and she looked not a day over thirty years old. Her black massy hair shone as brightly as ever, and she was as lissom as she had ever been. The only difference was a certain maturity to her frame, and that look of patience and understanding in her great gray eyes.

Even the marriage with Lacy, the terrible year spent with him, had faded from her memory until it had taken on the proportions of some ancient tragic romance she had read in a book.

She had been getting a little lonely of late, and after she passed her fortieth birthday, a week before, she had begun wondering what life would be like ten, or even twenty years from now. She would cry a little in the evenings, for she knew she could not work forever, and she knew too that she could not expect her harum-scarum son to settle down, and marry, and have children she could unload her heart upon in her old age. He was not that kind, she knew. As soon think of changing a gerfalcon into a twittering pigeon, or a leopard into a house cat. She did not blame him. Had she been a man she would have had exactly the same vision of life as he — a restless, roving one. There was no place for her to return to in Ireland; the entail of the estate was broken and the property had descended to a nephew. She had friends in New York, to be sure, but to impose on a friendship the burden of a restless, homeless woman of middle age was something she, with her

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sportsmanlike blood, could not do. For the first time in her life her seemingly indomitable courage failed her. It was then she met John Hunter — Colonel John Hunter — and she fell in love with him, and he with her.

She was a big woman now, a power in business circles, but she had never forgotten the hobbies of her girlhood. She could still lift a hunter over a six-foot-six-inch gate, and she still thrilled to the intricacies of fine lace. An exhibition of Philippine industries was held somewhere on Forty-second Street and she went there to see the lace that had been brought over. She asked some technical questions of the little *mestiza* attendant. The girl, at a loss, appealed to a great bent pillar of a man, who was carefully selecting some cigars.

"My name is Hunter, John Hunter," he explained embarrassedly. "If there's any way I can help?"

And in this wise she met Colonel John Hunter — General now, of the Philippine Scouts. A gigantic frame of man, lean nearly to the point of emaciation; a great, sweeping line of jaw, with an embarrassedly smiling mouth; grizzled at the temples; great-nosed; with black eyes that seemed to pierce and to smile good-naturedly at the same time.

He had a long and honorable record, had John Hunter — in Cuba, in Porto Rico, and in the Philippines. He was very deadly in warfare and very kindly in peace, but the most marked characteristic about him was his shyness where women were concerned. He could never find anything to say to them, and he fidgeted so much in their company that they were as glad to be rid of him as he to get away. He was forty-five now, and unmarried, though it was not for lack of women who would have been glad to be wife to him had he been interested in them or had they been able to interest him.

There is a chemical affinity, which we can prove meticulously by the action of acids on salts, of gases on molten metal; by quantitative and qualitative analyses that leave no whit of doubt. There is a spiritual affinity, too, which we cannot prove, but which is evidenced by such occurrences as John Hunter, shyest of men, babbling over tea at the Ritz to Nan Lacy, most guarded of women, whom he had met a bare half-hour before — and she as conversationally enthusiastic as he. It was evidenced by her parting from him blushingly, having made an appointment to ride with him in the park next morning; and by the cock of his head and the swing of his stride as he walked up the avenue, and by the lightest expression of his heart he had experienced since he had received his first command. They rode together next morning and had lunch. They met the next day. A week whirled by in a vortex, and the end naturally came.

It came at the most unromantic of places, at the most unromantic of times. It came while they were sitting on a bench in Central Park on a Saturday afternoon. Beside them horses clumped painfully along the bridle-

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paths, their mouths sawed by clumsy riders. Nearby, motors snarled past with a raucous barking of horns. A few urchins chased one another loudly about. Hunter moved his head away.

"There's something I wanted to say," he announced haltingly. He stopped for a few instants. "There's something I wanted to say, and I don't know how to put it. I had it all worked out a while ago.

"You see," he went on lamely, "I've never been married."

He felt a wild panic then, as if he wanted to rise up and flee away. He summoned up enough courage to look at her face, to see if she were shocked, insulted, hurt. She was smiling at him tenderly, and her eyes were full of tears.

There was no wild embrace in the middle of the public park. There was no torrent of love-making. He simply put out his hand and took hers, and patted it gently. Thus they were affianced.

She was very much in love. It tingled in every nerve of her body and filled every crevice of her brain, and set her spirit singing tunefully.

She was happy now, utterly happy. No longer would she look in terror toward the barren years. There was a goodly stretch of life and health before them both, and then they would drift imperceptibly into the quietness of age, as on the breast of a singing river.

There were two fears before her: One was the husband unheard from for twenty-two years. She was certain he was dead, but it seemed wrong to contract a marriage with another man while there was this uncertainty.

"I know he's dead!" she told Hunter, "but somehow I . . ."

"I understand," the soldier told her. "You don't feel a widow. At any rate, he's legally dead, and you're free. We can get out the legal papers."

So that was settled. But something that disturbed her more was the attitude her son might adopt. She felt toward him as she might have felt toward a parent whose consent she was uncertain of — a great shyness, a modesty, a sort of unreasonable fear. Very timidly in a dimmed light, she told her son about it. He listened to her, and when he raised his face, he saw her features glowing, and the minute, gemlike dimness in her eyes. He went over and, putting his arm about her, kissed her silently, unadroitly. Then he straightened up, and his voice was gruff, as though he were ashamed of giving way.

"I think I'll take a little stroll," he said.

She smiled to herself, for she knew well where he was going on his stroll. He was going out to call on Colonel Hunter, and to size him up, as the lad's saying was. It warmed her heart to feel that she had him looking after her, even in that undemonstrative, casual way of his. She went singing about the apartment until he returned, stopping at times to try to guess what he would say when he returned.

When he came in, his face was puz-

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zled, and a certain line of disgust ran across his features. She started up in fear.

"What is it, Norman!" she cried. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, "I was thinking of the Gold Coast. A Galla there wanted to sell me a diamond stolen from the Kimberley mines. Big as the Kohinoor! Offered him six hundred bones for it, but he wanted a thousand and I hadn't it. And if I had just belted him one on the jaw I could have got it for nothing. I wish to Heaven I had! It would have made a corking wedding present for you!"

He looked across the dingy table in the back room of the saloon at the gray-haired, furtive man in front of him. Detail by detail he went over the man's appearance — the livid skin and manner of speaking with half-closed lips, which denoted the man had known jails; the furtive, cowardly, and overwise look in the eyes, that told of evil learned and done; the shabby but well-brushed clothes, the last stand of the old dandy.

"So you're my dad!" he said acidly.

"Yes, I'm your dad," the old man agreed nervously.

"So you thought you'd look us up, Dad," the son went on. "Why didn't you do it before?"

"I thought you were all dead," Bertrand Lacy explained nervously. "It was only when I saw that article about your mother in the paper — how successful she had been, and how she was going to marry this colonel — that I knew she was alive. I found out where she was, from the people in New York, and I came on."

They had come down for a few weeks to a little New England watering-place, Nan Lacy and John Hunter, and Norman came also with them, by way of a chaperon. They had not been married yet, and they were not to be for a month. This was not to be a hole-in-the-corner affair like her first venture, Hunter had decided in his generous way. She was to have everything she missed then, and more — a reverend cleric and a crowded church, an organ reverberating through the chancel, ushers in dress-uniform.

And so her son, who was more at home in any other line of endeavor, found himself in the profession of chaperon. To his credit or discredit, as the case may be, he was lax in the performance of his duties, leaving his mother and the colonel severely alone while they went riding or walking. It was due to this that he had been in the hotel when the furtive man was making inquiries about Mrs. Lacy. Norman discovered him trying to extract some information from the porter of the hotel.

"Mrs. Lacy is out," he went forward and told him, "but I am Norman Lacy, her son, and if there is anything I can do for you . . ."

He had steered the furtive man into a quiet saloon, and had listened, expressionless, to the information that his companion was his father.

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"And now that you are back," the son went on warily, "this wedding is off?"

"I don't know," the father sparred. "It seems a pity!"

"Come through!" The son had dropped his caustic manner and his voice grated with menace. "What do you want?"

"I've got my rights," the father laughed.

"You've got no rights," the son retorted hotly. "You're legally dead."

The elder Lacy smiled. Of all the subtle weapons that Satan had placed in his hand, the subtlest was his understanding of women. He might be legally dead. He might be a scoundrel and a blackguard. But he knew that Nan Lacy would marry no man if she were confronted with her first husband. He knew that to marry Hunter, with Lacy about, would appear to her a monstrous immodesty, a thing that she would shrink from as the blackest of mortal sins. Even her own high sense of chastity he would turn against her as a weapon. He knew women well. And from that mocking smile the son glimpsed something of the danger in which his mother's happiness stood.

"Well?" he snapped. "What is it? What do you want? Money?"

The older man was on sure ground now. His nervousness had worn off.

"Yes, you pup!" he answered boldly. "That's what I want, and that's what I'm going to get, and get quick. And I want a lot of it. I want five thousand."

"I haven't got it," the son answered. "It's out of the question."

"If you haven't got it, your mother has, and you can get it from her, or you and her new friend can fix it up between you. I don't care what you do. But I'm going to get it."

The son rose in a passion of fury, but his four years in the jungle had taught him something. It had taught him the value of cunning as well as the value of strength. To strike the man now would be as dangerous as to strike a fanged snake.

"I'll give you until tomorrow at this hour," the father dictated, "and if it isn't fixed — then blooey! Understand? Now go home and have a family party. Regards from Pop!"

The son rose and went off. At the door he turned.

"Until tomorrow!" he said quietly. "And if, in the meantime, you dare speak to my mother, or to Colonel Hunter, then God help you!"

It occurred to him more than once that day, with a sense of ridiculousness, that in all his life he had never thought as much as in those ten hours. What could he do? he asked himself in panic. Should he go to the colonel and tell him everything? The man would understand. That was a last resort. He had friends in New York, rich men — men he had met abroad — who might help. Might, he repeated to himself. What could he do? He would give his right hand, his right eye, his life even, to preserve that look of happiness on his mother's face.

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He had been lax in his duties as chaperon until now, but today he never let his charges out of his sight for an instant. He had a vague dread that his mother might meet the man in the street, or that the father himself, in his impatience to make a killing, might disclose himself to Hunter. From noon until ten at night he thrust himself upon the lovers. Even when, at that hour, they decided to stroll down the pier, he insisted upon walking along with them.

They walked down the street and onto the deserted quay. There was the cold quality of a May night in the air, and no moon. Outside the circles of light cast by the dim street lamps was a purple darkness like velvet, like some sort of opaque liquid through which one walked. They passed a garish picture house, with its posters of black and red. They skirted a shipbuilding yard, the white population of whose slips were invisible in the dark. Their feet struck hollowly on the wooden planks of the pier, and they passed along slowly through the black air toward the violet nimbus of the great incandescent light in the middle of the pier.

To the right of them the harbor lay, the tiny lights of the opposite shore mirrored faintly on its surface. To the left of them the wooded country rose, and there was a faint *shush* to the boughs of the trees as a quiet and unseen wind moved them.

The colonel and Nan Lacy stopped under the bluish shower of incandescent light and gazed silently across the dark space. The son looked vacantly over the waters. He was standing lazily, his hands in his pockets, when he stiffened into attention suddenly, like a bird-dog pointing. His ear had caught the shuffle of careful footsteps, and as he threw his head around to catch a glimpse of the passer-by, he saw a furtive, rapid figure slip into the shadows past them.

"Hum!" he said to himself. He had recognized his father. So the man was stalking them. He was afraid, perhaps, that the son would have bundled the party off to some other place and have the wedding celebrated before he could act. He was taking no chances on that. He was as much on guard as his son was.

The boy turned to his mother.

"I think I'll stroll to the end of the dock," he said.

"Be careful," she warned him, "be careful, Norman. It is pitch-dark."

"Oh, I'll be all right," he laughed. He made his way down the pier surefootedly through the darkness until he came to the crouching figure in the shadows.

"I want to have that thing out," he whispered. "Come along with me."

He walked along until they came to the end of the pier, picking out his steps with the certainty of a cat in the dark. His father followed him haltingly. He stopped at the edge and turned on the man.

"So you've been following them about all day!" he sneered. "Probably telling your business to everyone too!"

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"No such fool," his father laughed. "Nobody knows my business and nobody knows I'm following you around. Well, did you get that money?"

"I didn't get that money," the boy told him; "and, what's more, I'm not going to get it. Now, listen to me. Your game's up. There's nothing you can get out of us. You're lucky you're not in jail for blackmail. One word to you: you'd better clear."

There was an instant's silence. The faint, invisible wind continued to rustle tree branches in a harmonious, swinging minor, and the outgoing tide swirled against the pier supports and choked in the little whirlpools. There was an unpleasant, dangerous laugh from the elder man.

"So that's the lay, eh?" he sneered. "Well, you've got something coming to all of you. I'll give you scandal if you like. I'll put the lid on this little party.

"Here I am. There's my wife, up there —" he was pointing to the figures beneath the arc-light — "snuggling to another man's side, and planning to marry him, the shameless —"

"You had better clear," the son warned.

"Clear!" Again the laugh came. "I'm going right up there and take a hand in the game. I'm going to get my rights."

"I'll give you a chance," the son said grimly. "Will you get out and stay out?"

The father had come around in front of the son, between him and the water. He looked at the boy. Dimly, from looking at each other, they could see each other's features in the pitch-dark.

"No!" he said. "I'm going to face them. I'll have my rights. I want justice!"

"Justice!" his son repeated.

"Yes, justice!"

"Very well," the boy said calmly. He balanced himself easily on his feet, and pushed out his left arm as a range-finder. He drew back his sledge-hammer right hand. "God forgive you," he muttered, and he drove it home.

He heard the dull, thudding crack as it reached the jaw, and the heavy splash that followed. He stood alone on the pier-head for a minute, listening for other sounds, but all that came to his ears was the restless movement of the pine trees, and the rush of hurrying water.

He turned and sauntered up the pier easily. His mother was looking for him anxiously.

"I was afraid," she said. "I heard a splash."

"It wasn't I," he laughed. "Probably some fish or other." He stood and looked at the pair of them. "Listen," he said quizzically. "I've been playing chaperon all day, and I'm a bit tired of it. I'm going off to shoot a game of pool. Good night."

His mother's eyes sparkled with pride as she watched his loose swinging stride, and Hunter's dimmed a little as he watched her. "She cares so much for him," the soldier thought. "I wonder does he appreciate it?"

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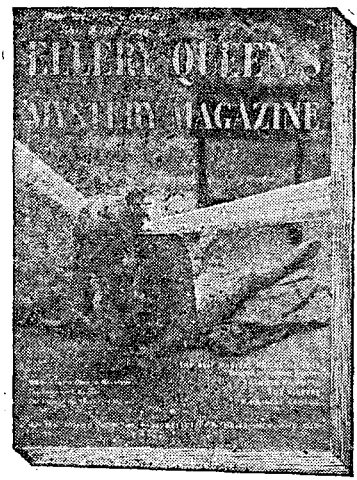
Winner of EQMM's February Cover Contest

THE MODEL MURDER

by ALLEN F. REID



AT NINE that night Homicide Lieutenant Blanchard was called from a relaxing detective story to the phone. He was needed badly in Greenwich Village — a murder. It was evident who was guilty but they would never be able to convict him. So Blanchard hurried to the site and met the author of the call, Detective-Sergeant Bellows, who told him that everybody was inside waiting.

"Let's have the story from the beginning," ordered Lieutenant Blanchard.

"About eight o'clock," Bellows began, "a radio repairman named Joe Capelli called the local precinct with this story: he and his wife had come over here to the apartment of this artist, François Dupret, about three o'clock, and had had a few drinks. Capelli went home to do some work about four and left his wife with Dupret. She was modeling for a painting Dupret was making, and was supposed to be home by six. When she didn't arrive by six thirty Capelli called Dupret but got no answer. At seven, and again at seven thirty, there was still no answer. Now, Capelli's place is only five blocks away, so he walked over and rang the doorbell — but he couldn't get in. He asked the superintendent to go into Dupret's apartment with him to see if everything was all right. The superintendent refused. So Capelli called the police.

"Now, Capelli said he was afraid that his wife had been carrying on a little too freely and that she and Dupret might be dead drunk — so he wanted to get her and take her home. He finally got one of the precinct boys, Murphy, to go with him. They got the superintendent to open the door to the apartment, and they went in. Nobody was in any of the other rooms, and the door to the studio was closed. Murphy knocked on the studio door and called, 'Hello, we're coming in!' but got no answer.

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"As you'll see, the studio is off the living room, and the door opened out toward them. So Murphy tried to open it. It wasn't locked but would move only about an inch — not enough to clear the frame. As he pulled they heard a sort of choking noise inside. So Murphy tugged even harder, and finally got it far enough open so they could just see through a crack into the room — enough to see that the inside knob was tied with what looked like the end of a sheet. So the superintendent got a hammer, and they took the door off its hinges and got in.

"Well, here's what they found: The inside knob had been tied with a long white piece of cloth that Dupret used for studio props — togas, veils, and such. The other end was tied to a radiator. And in the middle was a running knot around the neck of Mrs. Capelli, now one of the naked and the dead. She'd been strangled a few minutes before by Murphy's tugging at the door."

Bellows paused heavily.

The lieutenant silently waved him to proceed.

"Murphy tried artificial respiration and they got an emergency squad right away, but it was no use. She had been supported in a half-sitting position by the cloth around her neck. Her hands were tied behind her with a black ribbon, and she reeked of alcohol. Dupret was sprawled out in a chair nearby, dead drunk.

"Now the devil of it is," Bellows groaned, "that it was Murphy who actually killed her. And Dupret can say he and Mrs. Capelli were playing games or something — that nobody had any business coming in through a locked door — and that it wasn't his fault if someone did come in and killed her."

"Could anybody else have rigged this?" asked Lieutenant Blanchard thoughtfully.

"Impossible. All the windows in the room were locked tight from the inside, and there aren't any other doors."

"Have you talked to Dupret at all?"

"Yes. We woke him up with a bit of doing. He was fuzzy, but he was pretty positive that he doesn't remember a thing about the tie-up act. He remembers Capelli leaving about four, Mrs. Capelli and he finishing their drinks — and that's all he remembers."

Blanchard thought silently for a moment and then said abruptly, "Well, let's go in and see." He examined the door hinges, the doorknob, and the cloth carefully; then he sent them to the laboratory with precise instructions. He spoke briefly with the medical examiner and the police technicians. He stopped long enough with Capelli and Dupret to ask them for blood samples, and after obtaining them, told the two men they would have to be detained at the station until morning. Then he went home, smoked a few cigarettes pensively and went to bed.

The next morning he assembled

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the reports, jotted down some notes, and directed that Joe Capelli be booked for the murder of his wife. Sergeant Bellows was aghast at the order.

Blanchard explained. "Capelli put knockout drops in Mrs. Capelli's and Dupret's drinks. Then he left them, waited around till they had passed out, came back, and poured more whiskey down their throats. He tied up his wife, unscrewed the outside knob of the door, and tied the inside knob with its connecting rod to the strangulation cloth. He fastened some strong wire to the connecting rod, threaded it through the hole in the latch, went outside, shut the door, pulled the knob and connecting rod into place, and reconnected the outside knob. The trap was all set, and he was safe — the perfect murder in a locked room. *But* — in the lab the connecting rod showed particles of a strong radio wire corresponding exactly to some found in Capelli's shop; *and* — the screw in the outside knob shows marks corresponding microscopically to a screwdriver from Capelli's shop. It was the blood tests, of course, that proved Dupret and Mrs. Capelli had been drugged. Motive? — obvious. In other words, Capelli is headed for a locked room from which he'll never get out either!"

Honorable Mentions

Of the honorable mentions, one story was so outstanding that the judges decided to add a second prize of $25 to our originally announced awards. This prize went to:

Mrs. Walter Schaible, Chicago, Illinois.

Other Honorable Mentions

Bruce M. Bunting, Lincoln, Nebraska
Elizabeth Hoard, St. Davids, Pennsylvania
John F. Hopkins, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
E. A. Lane, Rochester, New York
Thomas Nickerson, Honolulu, Hawaii
Jack Sargent, Avalon, California

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VIOLA BROTHERS SHORE SELECTS . . .

Which are the twelve best detective short stories ever written? . . . You will recall that we asked a special panel of experts, consisting of James Hilton, Howard Haycraft, John Dickson Carr, Anthony Boucher, Vincent Starrett, James Sandoe, August Derleth, Viola Brothers Shore, Lee Wright, Lew D. Feldman, Charles Honce, and your Editors (acting as twelfth talesmen), to select the finest detective short stories in 109 years of fictional ferretry — the crème de la *crime. Among 83 stories chosen, a 'tec twelvesome captured the highest honors. Here is* THE GOLDEN DOZEN:

The Hands of Mr. Ottermole . . . . . by Thomas Burke
The Purloined Letter . . . . . by Edgar A. Poe
The Red-Headed League . . . . . by A. Conan Doyle
The Avenging Chance . . . . . by Anthony Berkeley
The Absent-Minded Coterie . . . . . by Robert Barr
The Problem of Cell 13 . . . . . by Jacques Futrelle
The Oracle of the Dog . . . . . by G. K. Chesterton
Naboth's Vineyard . . . . . by Melville Davisson Post
The Gioconda Smile . . . . . by Aldous Huxley
The Yellow Slugs . . . . . by H. C. Bailey
The Genuine Tabard . . . . . by E. C. Bentley
Suspicion . . . . . by Dorothy L. Sayers

This month we bring you Robert Barr's "The Absent-Minded Coterie," sponsored by Viola Brothers Shore. Miss Shore vehemently disclaims being an "expert" — but let's look at the record. She is the author, among other books, of two detective novels, THE BEAUTY MASK MURDER *and* MURDER ON THE GLASS FLOOR. *She was a well-known Hollywood scenarist. For eight years she taught at the League of American Writers' School and at other writers' Craft Cooperatives. At the present time, as only a segment of her full circle of daily work (her work-day is twelve hours of writing, reading, thinking, and doing, often uninterrupted even for meals, except for a few grapes and a stalk of celery), she is teaching a course called Advanced Short Story Writing, at New York University — and we can tell you, from personal knowledge, that Miss Shore is an exceptionally perceptive and communicative teacher. The theatre is her true love now, and while she has had only one revue produced so far, she thinks the play she wrote this past summer is a mature and powerful drama. And between-times Miss Shore continues her short-story experimenting in the field of whydunits. She likes mystery stories, and believes that "deepened with some insight into psychology and into the social conditions which contribute to the*

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shaping of human beings (and vice versa), they will have important values entirely apart from Escape."

- No expert, she says . . . Well, we won't quibble over qualities and qualifications. To use Miss Shore's own words, "here are my twelve favorites — at least, they come to my mind most strongly, so they must have impressed me most . . ."

The Absent-Minded Coterie .....by Robert Barr
The Hands of Mr. Ottermole .....by Thomas Burke
The Purloined Letter .....by Edgar A. Poe
The Red-Headed League.....by A. Conan Doyle
Suspicion.....by Dorothy L. Sayers
The Butler.....by Bennet Copplestone
The Little Dry Sticks.....by Faraday Keene
The Perfect Crime .....by Ben Ray Redman
The Oracle of the Dog .....by G. K. Chesterton
The Open Window .....by Saki (H. H. Munro)
The Three Strangers.....by Thomas Hardy
The Tragedy at Brookbend Cottage.by Ernest Bramah

Certain authors become, in an anthological sense, one-story writers. Although Robert Barr was a prolific producer — we have seven volumes of his detective-crime short stories in our collection, and there are probably more — his fame today in the gumshoe genre rests almost exclusively on his short-story masterpiece, "The Absent-Minded Coterie." (In a similar manner, Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13" is the overwhelming, unavoidable, inevitable choice of all critics, among that author's equally prolific output.) And there is no denying the never-fading charm of the absent-minded league; the basic plot idea of the story was a brilliant criminological conception.

THE ABSENT-MINDED COTERIE

by ROBERT BARR

I WELL remember the November day when I first heard of the Summertrees case, because there hung over London a fog so thick that two or three times I lost my way, and no cab was to be had at any price. The few cabmen then in the streets were leading their animals slowly along,

From "The Triumphs of Eugène Valmont," by Robert Barr.
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making for their stables. It was one of those depressing London days which filled me with *ennui* and a yearning for my own clear city of Paris, where, if we are ever visited by a slight mist, it is at least clean, white vapor, and not this horrible London mixture saturated with suffocating carbon. The fog was too thick for any passer to read the contents bills of the newspapers plastered on the pavement, and as there were probably no races that day the newsboys were shouting what they considered the next most important event — the election of an American President. I bought a paper and thrust it into my pocket. It was late when I reached my flat, and, after dining there, which was an unusual thing for me to do, I put on my slippers, took an easy-chair before the fire, and began to read my evening journal. I was distressed to learn that the eloquent Mr. Bryan had been defeated. I knew little about the silver question, but the man's oratorical powers had appealed to me, and my sympathy was aroused because he owned many silver mines, and yet the price of the metal was so low that apparently he could not make a living through the operation of them. . . .

I had allowed my paper to slip to the floor, for in very truth the fog was penetrating even into my flat, and it was becoming difficult to read, notwithstanding the electric light. My man came in, and announced that Mr. Spenser Hale wished to see me, and, indeed, any night, but especially when there is rain or fog outside, I am more pleased to talk with a friend than to read a newspaper.

"*Mon Dieu*, my dear Monsieur Hale, it is a brave man you are to venture out in such a fog as is abroad tonight."

"Ah, Monsieur Valmont," said Hale with pride, "you cannot raise a fog like this in Paris!"

"No. There you are supreme," I admitted, rising and saluting my visitor, then offering him a chair. "It is surely an important thing that brought you out on such a night as this. The fog must be very thick in Scotland Yard."

This delicate shaft of fancy completely missed him, and he answered stolidly: "It's thick all over London, and, indeed, throughout most of England."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, but he did not see that either.

"You are a very, very clever man, Monsieur Valmont, so all I need say is that the question which brought me here is the same as that on which the American election was fought. Now, to a countryman, I should be compelled to give further explanation, but to you, monsieur, that will not be necessary."

There are times when I dislike the crafty smile and partial closing of the eyes which always distinguishes Spenser Hale when he places on the table a problem which he expects will baffle me. If I said he never did baffle me, I would be wrong, of course, for sometimes the utter simplicity of the puzzles which trouble him leads me into

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an intricate involution entirely unnecessary in the circumstances.

I pressed my fingertips together, and gazed for a few moments at the ceiling. Hale had lit his black pipe, and my silent servant placed at his elbow the whisky and soda, then tiptoed out of the room. As the door closed my eyes came from the ceiling to the level of Hale's expansive countenance.

"Have they eluded you?" I asked quietly.

"Who?"

"The coiners."

Hale's pipe dropped from his jaw, but he managed to catch it before it reached the floor. Then he took a gulp from the tumbler.

"That was just a lucky shot," he said.

"*Parfaitement*," I replied carelessly.

"Oh, stow that!" cried Hale impolitely. He is a trifle prone to strong and even slangy expressions when puzzled. "Tell me how you guessed it."

"It is very simple, *mon ami*. The question on which the American election was fought is the price of silver, which is so low that it has ruined Mr. Bryan. Silver troubled America, *ergo* silver troubles Scotland Yard.

"Very well; the natural inference is that someone has stolen bars of silver. But such a theft happened three months ago, when the metal was being unloaded from a German steamer at Southampton, and my dear friend Spenser Hale ran down the thieves very cleverly as they were trying to dissolve the marks off the bars with acid. Now crimes do not run in series, like the numbers in roulette at Monte Carlo. The thieves are men of brains. They say to themselves, 'What chance is there successfully to steal bars of silver while Mr. Hale is at Scotland Yard?' Eh, my good friend?"

"Really, Valmont," said Hale, taking another sip, "sometimes you almost persuade me that you have reasoning powers."

"Thanks, comrade. Then it is not a *theft* of silver we have now to deal with. But the American election was fought on the *price* of silver. If silver had been high in cost, there would have been no silver question. So the crime that is bothering you arises through the low price of silver, and this suggests that it must be a case of illicit coinage, for there the low price of the metal comes in. You have, perhaps, found a more subtle illegitimate act going forward than heretofore. Someone is making your shillings and your half-crowns from real silver, instead of from baser metal, and yet there is a large profit which has not hitherto been possible through the high price of silver. With the old conditions you were familiar, but this new element sets at naught all your previous formulas. That is how I reasoned the matter out."

"Well, Valmont, you have hit it, I'll say that for you. There is a gang of expert coiners who are putting out real silver money, and making a clear shilling on the half-crown. We can find no trace of the coiners, but we

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know the man who is shoving the stuff."

"That ought to be sufficient," I suggested.

"Yes, it should, but it hasn't proved so up to date. Now I came tonight to see if you would do one of your French tricks for us, right on the quiet."

"What French trick, Monsieur Spenser Hale?" I inquired with some asperity, forgetting for the moment that the man invariably became impolite when he grew excited.

"No offense intended," said this blundering officer, who really is a good-natured fellow, but always puts his foot in it, and then apologizes. "I want someone to go through a man's house without a search warrant, spot the evidence, let me know, and then we'll rush the place before he has time to hide his tracks."

"Who is this man, and where does he live?"

"His name is Ralph Summertrees, and he lives in a very natty little *bijou* residence, as the advertisements call it, situated in no less a fashionable street than Park Lane."

"I see. What has aroused your suspicions against him?"

"Well, you know, that's an expensive district to live in; it takes a bit of money. This Summertrees has no ostensible business, yet every Friday he goes to the United Capital Bank in Piccadilly, and deposits a bag of swag, usually all silver coin."

"Yes; and this money?"

"This money, so far as we can learn, contains a good many of these new pieces which never saw the British Mint."

"It's not all the new coinage, then?"

"Oh, no, he's a bit too artful for that! You see, a man can go round London, his pockets filled with new-coined five-shilling pieces, buy this, that, and the other, and come home with his change in legitimate coins of the realm — half-crowns, florins, shillings, sixpences, and all that."

"I see. Then why don't you nab him one day when his pockets are stuffed with illegitimate five-shilling pieces?"

"That could be done, of course, and I've thought of it, but, you see, we want to land the whole gang. Once we arrested him, without knowing where the money came from, the real coiners would take flight."

"How do you know he is not the real coiner himself?"

Now poor Hale is as easy to read as a book. He hesitated before answering this question, and looked confused as a culprit caught in some dishonest act.

"You need not be afraid to tell me," I said soothingly, after a pause. "You have had one of your men in Mr. Summertrees' house, and so learned that he is not the coiner. But your man has not succeeded in getting you evidence to incriminate other people."

"You've hit it again, Monsieur Valmont. One of my men has been Summertrees' butler for two weeks,

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but, as you say, he has found no evidence."

"Is he still butler?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me how far you have got. You know that Summertrees deposits a bag of coin every Friday in the Piccadilly Bank, and I suppose the bank has allowed you to examine one or two of the bags."

"Yes, they have, but, you see, banks are very difficult to treat with. They don't like detectives bothering round, and while they do not stand out against the law, still they never answer any more questions than they're asked, and Mr. Summertrees has been a good customer at the United Capital for many years."

"Haven't you found out where the money comes from?"

"Yes, we have; it is brought there night after night by a man who looks like a respectable city clerk, and he puts it into a large safe, of which he holds the key, this safe being on the ground floor, in the dining room."

"Haven't you followed the clerk?"

"Yes. He sleeps in the Park Lane house every night and goes up in the morning to an old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road, where he stays all day, returning with his bag of money in the evening."

"Why don't you arrest and question him?"

"Well, Monsieur Valmont, there is just the same objection to his arrest as to that of Summertrees himself. We could easily arrest both, but we have not the slightest evidence against either of them, and then, although we put the go-betweens in clink, the worst criminals of the lot would escape."

"Nothing suspicious about the old curiosity shop?"

"No. It appears to be perfectly regular."

"This game has been going on under your noses for how long?"

"For about six weeks."

"Is Summertrees a married man?"

"No."

"Of what is his household comprised?"

"There is the butler, then the valet, and last the French cook."

"Ah," cried I, "the French cook! This case interests me. So Summertrees has succeeded in completely disconcerting your man? Has he prevented him going from top to bottom of the house?"

"Oh, no! He has rather assisted him than otherwise. On one occasion he went to the safe, took out the money, had Podgers — that's my chap's name — help him to count it, and then actually sent Podgers to the bank with the bag of coin."

"And Podgers has been all over the place?"

"Yes."

"Saw no signs of a coining establishment?"

"No. It is absolutely impossible that any coining can be done there. Besides, as I tell you, that respectable clerk brings him the money."

"I suppose you want me to take Podgers's position?"

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"Well, Monsieur Valmont, to tell you the truth, I would rather you didn't. Podgers has done everything a man can do, but I thought if you got into the house, Podgers assisting, you might go through it night after night at your leisure."

"I see. That's just a little dangerous in England. I think I should prefer to assure myself the legitimate standing of being amiable Podgers's successor. You say that Summertrees has no business?"

"Well, sir, not what you might call a business. He is by way of being an author."

"Oh, an author, is he? When does he do his writing?"

"He locks himself up most of the day in his study."

"Does he come out for lunch?"

"No; he lights a little spirit lamp inside, Podgers tells me, and makes himself a cup of coffee, which he takes with a sandwich or two."

"That's rather frugal fare for Park Lane."

"Yes, Monsieur Valmont, it is, but he makes it up in the evening, when he has a long dinner, with all them foreign kickshaws you people like, done by his French cook."

"Sensible man! Well, Hale, I see I shall look forward with pleasure to making the acquaintance of Mr. Summertrees. Is there any restriction on the going and coming of your man Podgers?"

"None in the least. He can get away either night or day."

"Very good, friend Hale; bring him here tomorrow, as soon as our author locks himself up in his study, or rather, I should say, as soon as the respectable clerk leaves for Tottenham Court Road, which I should guess, as you put it, is about half an hour after his master turns the key of the room in which he writes."

"You are quite right in that guess, Valmont. How did you hit it?"

"Merely a surmise, Hale. There is a good deal of oddity about that Park Lane house, so it doesn't surprise me in the least that the master gets to work earlier in the morning than the man. I have also a suspicion that Ralph Summertrees knows perfectly well what the estimable Podgers is there for."

"What makes you think that?"

"I can give no reason except that my opinion of the acuteness of Summertrees has been gradually rising all the while you were speaking, and at the same time my estimate of Podgers's craft has been as steadily declining. However, bring the man here tomorrow."

Next day, about eleven o'clock, the ponderous Podgers, hat in hand, followed his chief into my room. His broad, impassive face gave him rather more the air of a genuine butler than I had expected, and this appearance, of course, was enhanced by his livery. His replies to my questions were those of a well-trained servant who will not say too much unless it is made worth his while.

"Sit down, Mr. Hale, and you, Podgers."

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The man disregarded my invitation, standing like a statue until his chief made a motion; then he dropped into a chair. The English are great on discipline.

"Now, Mr. Hale, I must first congratulate you on the make-up of Podgers. It is excellent. You depend less on artificial assistance than we do in France, and in that I think you are right."

"Oh, we know a bit over here, Monsieur Valmont!" said Hale, with pardonable pride.

"Now then, Podgers, I want to ask you about this clerk. What time does he arrive in the evening?"

"At prompt six, sir."

"Does he ring, or let himself in with a latchkey?"

"With a latchkey, sir."

"How does he carry the money?"

"In a little locked leather satchel, sir, flung over his shoulder."

"Does he go direct to the dining room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen him unlock the safe, and put in the money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the safe unlock with a word or a key?"

"With a key, sir. It's one of the old-fashioned kind."

"Then the clerk unlocks his leather money bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's three keys used within as many minutes. Are they separate or in a bunch?"

"In a bunch, sir."

"Did you ever see your master with this bunch of keys?"

"No, sir."

"You saw him open the safe once, I am told?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he use a separate key, or one of a bunch?"

Podgers slowly scratched his head, then said: "I don't just remember, sir."

"Once the money is in and the safe locked up, what does the clerk do?"

"Goes to his room, sir."

"Where is this room?"

"On the third floor, sir."

"Where do you sleep?"

"On the fourth floor with the rest of the servants, sir."

"Where does the master sleep?"

"On the second floor, adjoining his study."

"The house consists of four stories and a basement?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have somehow arrived at the suspicion that it is a very narrow house. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the clerk ever dine with your master?"

"No, sir. The clerk don't eat in the house at all, sir."

"Does he go away before breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"No one takes breakfast to his room?"

"No, sir."

"What time does he leave the house?"

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"At ten o'clock, sir."

"When is breakfast served?"

"At nine o'clock, sir."

"At what hour does your master retire to his study?"

"At half-past nine, sir."

"Locks the door on the inside?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never rings for anything during the day?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"What sort of man is he?"

Here Podgers was on familiar ground, and he rattled off a description minute in every particular.

"What I meant was, Podgers, is he silent, or talkative, or does he get angry? Does he seem furtive, suspicious, anxious, terrorized, calm, excitable — or what?"

"Well, sir, he is by way of being very quiet, never has much to say for hisself; never saw him angry or excited."

"Now, Podgers, you've been at Park Lane for a fortnight or more. You are a sharp, alert, observant man. What happens there that strikes you as unusual?"

"Well, I can't exactly say, sir," replied Podgers.

"Your professional duties have often compelled you to enact the part of butler before, otherwise you wouldn't do it so well. Isn't that the case?"

Podgers did not reply, but glanced at his chief. This was evidently a question pertaining to the service, which a subordinate was not allowed to answer. However, Hale said at once:

"Certainly. Podgers has been in dozens of places."

"Well, Podgers, just call to mind some of the other households where you have been employed, and tell me any particulars in which Mr. Summertrees' establishment differs from them."

Podgers pondered a long time.

"Well, sir, he do stick to writing pretty close."

"Ah, that's his profession, you see, Podgers. Hard at it from half-past nine till toward seven, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else, Podgers?"

"Well, sir, he's fond of reading, too; leastways, he's fond of newspapers."

"When does he read?"

"I never seen him read 'em, sir; indeed, so far as I can tell, I never knew the papers to be opened, but he takes them all in, sir."

"What, all the morning papers?"

"Yes, sir, and all the evening papers, too."

"Where are the morning papers placed?"

"On the table in his study, sir."

"And the evening papers?"

"Well, sir, when the evening papers come, the study is locked. They are put on a side table in the dining room, and he takes them upstairs with him to his study."

"This has happened every day since you've been there?"

"Yes, sir."

"You reported that very striking fact to your chief, of course?"

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"No, sir, I don't think I did," said Podgers, confused.

"You should have done so. Mr. Hale would have known how to make the most of a point so vital."

"Oh, come now, Valmont," interrupted Hale, "you're chaffing us! Plenty of people take in all the papers!"

"I think not. Even clubs and hotels subscribe to the leading journals only. You said *all*, I think, Podgers?"

"Well, *nearly* all, sir."

"But which is it? There's a vast difference."

"He takes a good many, sir."

"How many?"

"I don't just know, sir."

"That's easily found out, Valmont," cried Hale, with some impatience, "if you think it really important."

"I think it so important that I'm going back with Podgers myself. You can take me into the house, I suppose, when you return?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Coming back to these newspapers for a moment, Podgers. What is done with them?"

"They are sold to the ragman, sir, once a week."

"Who takes them from the study?"

"I do, sir."

"Do they appear to have been read very carefully?"

"Well, no, sir; leastways, some of them seem never to have been opened, or else folded up very carefully again."

"Did you notice that extracts have been clipped from any of them?"

"No, sir."

"Does Mr. Summertrees keep a scrapbook?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Oh, the case is perfectly plain!" said I, leaning back in my chair, and regarding the puzzled Hale with that cherubic expression of self-satisfaction which I know is so annoying to him.

"*What's* perfectly plain?" he demanded.

"Summertrees is no coiner, nor is he linked with any band of coiners."

"What is he, then?"

"Ah, that opens another avenue of inquiry! For all I know to the contrary, he may be the most honest of men. On the surface it would appear that he is a reasonably industrious tradesman in Tottenham Court Road, who is anxious that there should be no visible connection between a plebeian employment and so aristocratic a residence as that in Park Lane."

At this point Spenser Hale gave expression to one of those rare flashes of reason which are always an astonishment to his friends.

"That is nonsense, Monsieur Valmont," he said. "The man who is ashamed of the connection between his business and his house is one who is trying to get into society, or else the women of his family are trying it, as is usually the case. Now Summertrees has no family. He himself goes nowhere, gives no entertainments, and accepts no invitations. He belongs to no club. Therefore, to say that he is ashamed of his connection with the Tottenham Court Road shop

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is absurd. He is concealing the connection for some other reason that will bear looking into."

"My dear Hale, the Goddess of Wisdom herself could not have made a more sensible series of remarks. Now, *mon ami*, do you want my assistance, or have you enough to go on with?"

"Enough to go on with? We have nothing more than we had when I called on you last night."

"Last night, my dear Hale, you supposed this man was in league with coiners. Today you know he is not."

"I know you *say* he is not."

"It is the same thing, Monsieur Hale."

"Well, of all the conceited —" and the good Hale could get no farther.

"If you wish my assistance, it is yours."

"Very good. Not to put too fine a point upon it, I do."

"In that case, my dear Podgers, you will return to the residence of our friend Summertrees, and get together for me in a bundle all of yesterday's morning and evening papers that were delivered to the house. Can you do that, or are they mixed up in a heap in the coal cellar?"

"I can do it, sir. I have instructions to place each day's papers in a pile by itself in case they should be wanted again. There is always one week's supply in the cellar, and we sell the papers of the week before to the ragman."

"Excellent. Well, take the risk of abstracting one day's journals, and have them ready for me. I will call upon you at half-past three o'clock exactly, and then I want you to take me upstairs to the clerk's bedroom in the third story, which I suppose is not locked during the daytime?"

"No, sir, it is not."

With this the patient Podgers took his departure. Spenser Hale rose when his assistant left.

"Anything further I can do?" he asked.

"Yes; give me the address of the shop in Tottenham Court Road. Do you happen to have about you one of those new five-shilling pieces which you believe to be illegally coined?"

He opened his pocketbook, took out the bit of white metal, and handed it to me.

"I'm going to pass this off before evening," I said, putting it in my pocket, "and I hope none of your men will arrest me."

"That's all right," laughed Hale as he took his leave.

At half-past three Podgers was waiting for me, and opened the front door as I came up the steps, thus saving me the necessity of ringing. The house seemed strangely quiet. The French cook was evidently down in the basement, and we had probably all the upper part to ourselves, unless Summertrees was in his study, which I doubted. Podgers led me directly upstairs to the clerk's room on the third floor, walking on tiptoe, with an elephantine air of silence and secrecy combined, which struck me as unnecessary.

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"I will make an examination of this room," I said. "Kindly wait for me down by the door of the study."

The bedroom proved to be of respectable size when one considers the smallness of the house. The bed was all nicely made up, and there were two chairs in the room, but the usual washstand and swing mirror were not visible. However, seeing a curtain at the farther end of the room, I drew it aside, and found, as I expected, a fixed lavatory in an alcove of perhaps four feet deep by five in width. As the room was about fifteen feet wide, this left two-thirds of the space unaccounted for. A moment later I opened a door which exhibited a closet filled with clothes hanging on hooks. This left a space of five feet between the clothes closet and the lavatory. I thought at first that the entrance to the secret stairway must have issued from the lavatory, but examining the boards closely, although they sounded hollow to the knuckles, they were quite evidently plain match boarding, and not a concealed door. The entrance to the stairway, therefore, must issue from the clothes closet. The right-hand wall proved similar to the match boarding of the lavatory, so far as the casual eye or touch was concerned, but I saw at once it was a door. The latch turned out to be somewhat ingeniously operated by one of the hooks which held a pair of old trousers. I found that the hook, if pressed upward, allowed the door to swing outward, over the stairhead. Descending to the second floor, a similar latch let me into a similar clothes closet in the room beneath. The two rooms were identical in size, one directly above the other, the only difference being that the lower-room door gave into the study, instead of into the hall, as was the case with the upper chamber.

The study was extremely neat, either not much used, or the abode of a very methodical man. There was nothing on the table except a pile of that morning's papers. I walked to the farther end, turned the key in the lock, and came out upon the astonished Podgers.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed he.

"Quite so," I rejoined; "you've been tiptoeing past an empty room for the last two weeks. Now, if you'll come with me, Podgers, I'll show you how the trick is done."

When he entered the study I locked the door once more, and led the assumed butler, still tiptoeing through force of habit, up the stair into the top bedroom, and so out again, leaving everything exactly as we found it. We went down the main stair to the front hall, and there Podgers had my parcel of papers all neatly wrapped up. This bundle I carried to my flat, gave one of my assistants some instructions, and left him at work on the papers.

I took a cab to the foot of Tottenham Court Road, and walked up that street till I came to J. Simpson's old curiosity shop. After gazing at the well-filled windows for some time, I stepped inside, having selected a little

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iron crucifix displayed behind the pane.

I knew at once from Podgers's description that I was waited upon by the respectable clerk who brought the bag of money each night to Park Lane, and who, I was certain, was no other than Ralph Summertrees himself.

There was nothing in his manner differing from that of any other quiet salesman. The price of the crucifix proved to be seven-and-six, and I threw down a sovereign to pay for it.

"Do you mind the change being all in silver, sir?" he asked, and I answered without any eagerness, although the question aroused a suspicion that had begun to be allayed.

"Not in the least."

He gave me half a crown, three two-shilling pieces, and four separate shillings, all coins being well-worn silver of the realm, the undoubted inartistic product of the reputable British Mint. This seemed to dispose of the theory that he was palming off illegitimate money. He asked me if I were interested in any particular branch of antiquity, and I replied that my curiosity was merely general, and exceedingly amateurish, whereupon he invited me to look around. This I proceeded to do, while he resumed the addressing and stamping of some wrapped-up pamphlets which I surmised to be copies of his catalogue.

He made no attempt either to watch me or to press his wares upon me. I selected at random a little inkstand, and asked its price. It was two shillings, he said, whereupon I produced my fraudulent five-shilling piece. He took it, gave me the change without comment, and the last doubt about his connection with coiners flickered from my mind.

At this moment a young man came in who, I saw at once, was not a customer. He walked briskly to the farther end of the shop, and disappeared behind a partition which had one pane of glass in it that gave an outlook toward the front door.

"Excuse me a moment," said the shopkeeper, and he followed the young man into the private office.

As I examined the curious heterogeneous collection of things for sale, I heard the clink of coins being poured out on the lid of a desk or an uncovered table, and the murmur of voices floated out to me. I was now near the entrance of the shop, and by a sleight-of-hand trick, keeping the corner of my eye on the glass pane of the private office, I removed the key of the front door without a sound, and took an impression of it in wax, returning the key to its place unobserved. At this moment another young man came in, and walked straight past me into the private office. I heard him say:

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Simpson! How are you, Rogers?"

"Hello, Macpherson," saluted Rogers, who then came out, bidding good night to Mr. Simpson, and departed, whistling, down the street, but not before he had repeated his greeting to another young man entering, to whom

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he gave simply the name of Tyrrel.

I noted these three names in my mind. Two others came in together, but I was compelled to content myself with memorizing their features, for I did not learn their names. These men were evidently collectors, for I heard the rattle of money in every case; yet here was a small shop, doing apparently very little business, for I had been within it for more than half an hour, and yet remained the only customer. If credit were given, one collector would certainly have been sufficient, yet five had come in, and had poured their contributions into the pile Summertrees was to take home with him that night.

I determined to secure one of the pamphlets which the man had been addressing. They were piled on a shelf behind the counter, but I had no difficulty in reaching across and taking the one on top, which I slipped into my pocket. When the fifth young man went down the street, Summertrees himself emerged, and this time he carried in his hand the well-filled locked leather satchel, with the straps dangling. It was now approaching half-past five, and I saw he was eager to close up and get away.

"Anything else you fancy, sir?"

"No, or, rather, yes and no. You have a very interesting collection here, but it's getting so dark I can hardly see."

"I close at half-past five, sir."

"Ah! in that case," I said, consulting my watch, "I shall be pleased to call some other time."

"Thank you, sir," replied Summertrees quietly, and with that I took my leave.

From the corner of an alley on the other side of the street I saw him put up the shutters with his own hands, then he emerged with overcoat on, and the money satchel slung across his shoulder. He locked the door, tested it with his knuckles, and walked down the street, carrying under one arm the pamphlets he had been addressing. I followed him at some distance, saw him drop the pamphlets into the box at the first post office he passed, and walk rapidly toward his house in Park Lane.

When I returned to my flat and called in my assistant, he said:

"After putting to one side the regular advertisements of pills, soap, and whatnot, here is the only one common to all the newspapers, morning and evening alike. The advertisements are not identical, sir, but they have two points of similarity, or perhaps I should say three. They all profess to furnish a cure for absent-mindedness; they all ask that the applicant's chief hobby shall be stated, and they all bear the same address: Dr. Willoughby, in Tottenham Court Road."

"Thank you," said I, as he placed the scissored advertisements before me.

I read several of the announcements. They were all small, and perhaps that is why I had never noticed one of them in the newspapers, for certainly they were odd enough. Some

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asked for lists of absent-minded men, with the hobbies of each, and for these lists, prizes of from one shilling to six were offered. In other clippings Dr. Willoughby professed to be able to cure absent-mindedness. There were no fees and no treatment, but a pamphlet would be sent, which, if it did not benefit the receiver, could do no harm. The doctor was unable to meet patients personally, nor could he enter into correspondence with them. The address was the same as that of the old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road. At this juncture I pulled the pamphlet from my pocket, and saw it was entitled *Christian Science and Absent-Mindedness*, by Dr. Stamford Willoughby, and at the end of the article was the statement contained in the advertisements, that Dr. Willoughby would neither see patients nor hold any correspondence with them.

I drew a sheet of paper toward me, wrote to Dr. Willoughby, alleging that I was a very absent-minded man, and would be glad of his pamphlet, adding that my special hobby was the collecting of first editions. I then signed myself, *Alport Webster, Imperial Flats, London, W.*

I may here explain that it is often necessary for me to see people under some other name than the well-known appellation of Eugène Valmont. There are two doors to my flat, and on one of these is painted, "Eugène Valmont"; on the other there is a receptacle, into which can be slipped a sliding panel bearing any *nom de guerre* I choose. The same device is arranged on the ground floor, where the names of all the occupants of the building appear on the right-hand wall.

I sealed, addressed, and stamped my letter, then told my man to put out the name of Alport Webster, and if I did not happen to be in when any one called upon that mythical person, he was to make an appointment for me.

It was nearly six o'clock next afternoon when the card of Angus Macpherson was brought in to Mr. Alport Webster. I recognized the young man at once as the second who had entered the little shop, carrying his tribute to Mr. Simpson the day before. He held three volumes under his arm.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Macpherson? In what can I serve you?"

He placed the three volumes, backs upward, on my table.

"Are you interested at all in first editions, Mr. Webster?"

"It is the one thing I am interested in," I replied; "but unfortunately they often run into a lot of money."

"That is true," said Macpherson sympathetically, "and I have here three books, one of which is an exemplification of what you say. This one costs a hundred pounds. The last copy that was sold by auction in London brought a hundred and twenty-three pounds. This next one is forty pounds, and the third ten pounds. At these prices I am certain you could not duplicate three such

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treasures in any bookshop in Britain."

I examined them critically, and saw at once that what he said was true.

"Please take a chair, Mr. Macpherson. Do you mean to say you go round London with a hundred and fifty pounds' worth of goods under your arm in this careless way?"

The young man laughed.

"I run very little risk, Mr. Webster. I don't suppose anyone I meet imagines for a moment there is more under my arm than perhaps a trio of volumes I have picked up in the fourpenny box to take home with me."

I lingered over the volume for which he asked a hundred pounds, then said, looking across at him:

"How did you come to be possessed of this book?"

He turned upon me a fine, open countenance, and answered without hesitation in the frankest possible manner:

"I am not in actual possession of it, Mr. Webster. I am by way of being a connoisseur in rare and valuable books myself, although, of course, I have little money with which to indulge in the collection of them. I am acquainted, however, with the lovers of desirable books in different quarters of London. These three volumes, for instance, are from the library of a private gentleman in the West End. I have sold many books to him, and he knows I am trustworthy. He wishes to dispose of them at something under their real value, and has kindly allowed me to conduct the negotiations. I make it my business to find out those who are interested in rare books, and by such trading I add considerably to my income."

"How did you learn that I was a bibliophile?"

Mr. Macpherson laughed genially.

"Well, Mr. Webster, I must confess that I chanced it. I do that very often. I take a flat like this, and send in my card to the name on the door. If I am invited in, I ask the occupant the question I asked you just now: 'Are you interested in rare editions?' If he says no, I simply beg pardon and retire. If he says yes, then I show my wares."

"I see," said I, nodding. What a glib young liar he was, with that innocent face of his, and yet my next question brought forth the truth.

"As this is the first time you have called upon me, Mr. Macpherson, you have no objection to my making some further inquiry, I suppose. Would you mind telling me the name of the owner of these books in the West End?"

"His name is Mr. Ralph Summertrees, of Park Lane."

"Of Park Lane? Ah, indeed!"

"I shall be glad to leave the books with you, Mr. Webster, and if you care to make an appointment with Mr. Summertrees, I am sure he will not object to say a word in my favor."

"Oh, I do not in the least doubt it, and should not think of troubling the gentleman."

"I was going to tell you," went on the young man, "that I have a friend,

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a capitalist, who, in a way, is my supporter; for, as I said, I have little money of my own. I find it is often inconvenient for people to pay down any considerable sum. When, however, I strike a bargain, my capitalist buys the books, and I make an arrangement with my customer to pay a certain amount each week, and so even a large purchase is not felt, as I make the installments small enough to suit my client."

"You are employed during the day, I take it?"

"Yes, I am a clerk in the City."

"Suppose I take this book at ten pounds, what installments should I have to pay each week?"

"Oh, what you like, sir. Would five shillings be too much?"

"I think not."

"Very well, sir; if you pay me five shillings now, I will leave the book with you, and shall have pleasure in calling this day week for the next installment."

I put my hand into my pocket, and drew out two half-crowns, which I passed over to him.

"Do I need to sign any form of undertaking to pay the rest?"

The young man laughed cordially.

"Oh, no, sir, there is no formality necessary. You see, sir, this is largely a labor of love with me, although I don't deny I have my eye on the future. I am getting together what I hope will be a very valuable connection with gentlemen like yourself who are fond of books, and I trust some day that I may be able to resign my place with the insurance company and set up a choice little business of my own, where my knowledge of values in literature will prove useful."

And then, after making a note in a little book he took from his pocket, he bade me a most graceful goodbye and departed.

Next morning two articles were handed to me. The first came by post and was a pamphlet, *Christian Science and Absent-Mindedness*, exactly similar to the one I had taken away from the old curiosity shop; the second was a small key made from my wax impression that would fit the front door of the same shop — a key fashioned by an excellent anarchist friend of mine in an obscure street near Holborn.

That night at ten o'clock I was inside the old curiosity shop, with a small storage battery in my pocket, and a little electric glowlamp at my buttonhole.

I had expected to find the books of the establishment in a safe, which, if it was similar to the one in Park Lane, I was prepared to open with the false keys in my possession, or to take an impression of the keyhole and trust to my anarchist friend for the rest. But to my amazement I discovered all the papers pertaining to the concern in a desk which was not even locked. The books, three in number, were the ordinary daybook, journal, and ledger referring to the shop; bookkeeping of the older fashion; but in a portfolio lay half a dozen foolscap sheets, headed, *Mr. Rogers's List*, *Mr. Macpherson's*, *Mr. Tyrrel's* —

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the names I had already learned — and three others. These lists contained in the first column, names; in the second column, addresses; in the third, sums of money; and then in the small, square places following were amounts ranging from two-and-sixpence to a pound. At the bottom of Mr. Macpherson's list was the name Alport Webster, Imperial Flats, £10; then in the small, square place, five shillings. These six sheets, each headed by a canvasser's name, were evidently the record of current collections.

The six sheets were loose in a thin portfolio, but standing on a shelf above the desk were a number of fat volumes, one of which I took down, and saw that it contained similar lists running back several years. I noticed on Mr. Macpherson's current list the name of Lord Semptam, an eccentric old nobleman whom I knew slightly. Then turning to the list immediately before the current one the name was still there; I traced it back through list after list until I found the first entry, which was no less than three years previous, and there Lord Semptam was down for a piece of furniture costing fifty pounds, and on that account he had paid a pound a week for more than three years, totaling a hundred and seventy pounds at the least, and instantly the glorious simplicity of the scheme dawned upon me, and I became so interested in the swindle that I lit the gas, fearing my little lamp would be exhausted before my investigation ended.

In several instances the intended victim proved shrewder than old Simpson had counted upon, and the word *Settled* had been written on the line carrying the name when the exact number of installments was paid. But as these shrewd persons dropped out, others took their places, and Simpson's dependence on their absent-mindedness seemed to be justified in nine cases out of ten. His collectors were collecting long after the debt had been paid. In Lord Semptam's case, the payment had evidently become chronic, and the old man was giving away his pound a week to the suave Macpherson two years after his debt had been liquidated.

From the big volume I detached the loose leaf, dated 1893, which recorded Lord Semptam's purchase of a carved table for fifty pounds, and on which he had been paying a pound a week from that time to the date of which I am writing, which was November, 1896. This simple document, taken from the file of three years previous, was not likely to be missed, as would have been the case if I had selected a current sheet. I nevertheless made a copy of the names and addresses of Macpherson's present clients; then, carefully placing everything exactly as I had found it, I extinguished the gas, and went out of the shop, locking the door behind me. With the 1893 sheet in my pocket I resolved to prepare a pleasant little surprise for my suave friend Macpherson when he called to get his next installment of five shillings.

Late as was the hour when I reached

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Trafalgar Square, I could not deprive myself of the felicity of calling on Mr. Spenser Hale, who I knew was then on duty. He never appeared at his best during office hours, because officialism stiffened his stalwart frame. Mentally he was impressed with the importance of his position, and added to this he was not then allowed to smoke his big black pipe and terrible tobacco. He received me with the curtness I had been taught to expect when I inflicted myself upon him at his office. He greeted me abruptly with:

"I say, Valmont, how long do you expect to be on this job?"

"What job?" I asked mildly.

"Oh, you know what I mean: the Summertrees affair?"

"Oh, *that!*" I exclaimed, with surprise. "The Summertrees case is already completed, of course. If I had known you were in a hurry, I should have finished up everything yesterday, but as you and Podgers, and I don't know how many more, have been at it sixteen or seventeen days, if not longer, I thought I might venture to take as many hours, as I am working entirely alone. You said nothing about haste, you know."

"Oh, come now, Valmont, that's a bit thick. Do you mean to say you have already got evidence against the man?"

"Evidence absolute and complete."

"Then who are the coiners?"

"My most estimable friend, how often have I told you not to jump at conclusions? I informed you when you first spoke to me about the matter that Summertrees was neither a coiner nor a confederate of coiners. I secured evidence sufficient to convict him of quite another offense, which is probably unique in the annals of crime. I have penetrated the mystery of the shop, and discovered the reason for all those suspicious actions which quite properly set you on his trail. Now I wish you to come to my flat next Wednesday night at a quarter to six, prepared to make an arrest."

"I must know whom I am to arrest, and on what counts."

"Quite so, *mon ami.* I did not say you were to make an arrest, but merely warned you to be prepared. If you have time now to listen to the disclosures, I am quite at your service. I promise you there are some original features in the case. If, however, the present moment is inopportune, drop in on me at your convenience, previously telephoning so that you may know whether I am there or not, and thus your valuable time will not be expended purposelessly."

With this I presented to him my most courteous bow, and although his mystified expression hinted a suspicion that he thought I was chaffing him, as he would call it, official dignity dissolved somewhat, and he intimated his desire to hear all about it then and there. I had succeeded in arousing my friend Hale's curiosity. He listened to the evidence with perplexed brow, and at last ejaculated he would be blessed.

"This young man," I said, in con-

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clusion, "will call upon me at six on Wednesday afternoon, to receive his second five shillings. I propose that you, in your uniform, shall be seated there with me to receive him, and I am anxious to study Mr. Macpherson's countenance when he realizes he has walked in to confront a policeman. If you will then allow me to cross-examine him for a few moments, not after the manner of Scotland Yard, with a warning lest he incriminate himself, but in the free and easy fashion we adopt in Paris, I shall afterwards turn the case over to you to be dealt with at your discretion."

"You have a wonderful flow of language, Monsieur Valmont," was the officer's tribute to me. "I shall be on hand at a quarter to six on Wednesday."

"Meanwhile," said I, "kindly say nothing of this to anyone. We must arrange a complete surprise for Macpherson. That is essential. Please make no move in the matter at all until Wednesday night."

Spenser Hale, much impressed, nodded acquiescence, and I took a polite leave of him.

The question of lighting is an important one in a room such as mine, and electricity offers a good deal of scope to the ingenious. Of this fact I have taken full advantage. I can manipulate the lighting of my room so that any particular spot is bathed in brilliancy, while the rest of the space remains in comparative gloom, and I arranged the lamps so that the full force of their rays impinged against the door that Wednesday evening, while I sat on one side of the table in semi-darkness and Hale sat on the other, with a light beating down on him from above which gave him the odd, sculptured look of a living statue of Justice, stern and triumphant. Anyone entering the room would first be dazzled by the light, and next would see the gigantic form of Hale in full uniform.

When Angus Macpherson was shown into this room, he was quite visibly taken aback, and paused abruptly on the threshold, his gaze riveted on the huge policeman. I think his first purpose was to turn and run, but the door closed behind him, and he doubtless heard, as we all did, the sound of the bolt being thrust in its place, thus locking him in.

"I — I beg your pardon," he stammered, "I expected to meet Mr. Webster."

As he said this, I pressed the button under my table, and was instantly enshrouded with light. A sickly smile overspread the countenance of Macpherson as he caught sight of me.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Webster; I did not notice you at first."

It was a tense moment. I spoke slowly and impressively.

"Sir, perhaps you are not unacquainted with the name of Eugène Valmont."

He replied brazenly: "I am sorry to say, sir, I never heard of the gentleman before."

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At this came a most inopportune "Haw-haw" from that blockhead Spenser Hale, completely spoiling the dramatic situation I had elaborated with such thought and care.

"Haw-haw," brayed Spenser Hale, and at once reduced the emotional atmosphere to a fog of commonplace. However, what is a man to do? He must handle the tools with which it pleases Providence to provide him. I ignored Hale's untimely laughter.

"Sit down, sir," I said to Macpherson, and he obeyed.

"You have called on Lord Semptam this week," I continued sternly.

"Yes, sir."

"And collected a pound from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"In October, 1893, you sold Lord Semptam a carved antique table for fifty pounds?"

"Quite right, sir."

"When you were here last week you gave me Ralph Summertrees as the name of a gentleman living in Park Lane. You knew at the time that this man was your employer?"

Macpherson was now looking fixedly at me, and on this occasion made no reply. I went on calmly:

"You also knew that Summertrees, of Park Lane, was identical with Simpson, of Tottenham Court Road?"

"Well, sir," said Macpherson, "I don't exactly see what you're driving at, but it's quite usual for a man to carry on a business under an assumed name. There is nothing illegal about that."

"We will come to the illegality in a moment, Mr. Macpherson. You and Rogers and Tyrrel and others are confederates of this man Simpson."

"We are in his employ, sir, but no more confederates than clerks usually are."

"I think, Mr. Macpherson, I have said enough to show you that the game is what you call up. You are now in the presence of Mr. Spenser Hale, from Scotland Yard, who is waiting to hear your confession."

Here the stupid Hale broke in with his: "And remember, sir, that anything you say will be —"

"Excuse me, Mr. Hale," I interrupted hastily, "I shall turn over the case to you in a very few moments, but I ask you to remember our compact, and to leave it for the present entirely in my hands. Now, Mr. Macpherson, I want your confession."

"Confession?" protested Macpherson, with admirably simulated surprise. "I must say you use extraordinary terms, Mr. — Mr. — What did you say the name was?"

"Haw-haw," roared Hale. "His name is Monsieur Valmont."

"I implore you, Mr. Hale, to leave this man to me for a few moments. Now, Macpherson, what have you to say in your defense?"

"Where nothing criminal has been alleged, Monsieur Valmont, I see no necessity for defense. If you wish me to admit that somehow you have acquired a number of details regarding our business, I am perfectly willing to do so, and to subscribe to their ac-

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curacy. If you will be good enough to let me know of what you complain, I shall endeavor to make the point clear to you, if I can. There has evidently been some misapprehension, but for the life of me, without further explanation, I am as much in a fog as I was on my way coming here, for it is getting a little thick outside."

Macpherson certainly was conducting himself with great discretion, and presented, quite unconsciously, a much more diplomatic figure than my friend Spenser Hale, sitting stiffly opposite me. His tone was one of mild expostulation, mitigated by the intimation that all misunderstanding speedily would be cleared away. To outward view he offered a perfect picture of innocence, neither protesting too much nor too little. I had, however, another surprise in store for him — a trump card, as it were — and I played it down on the table.

"There!" I cried with vim, "have you ever seen that sheet before?"

He glanced at it.

"Oh, yes," he said, "that has been abstracted from our file. It is what I call my visiting list."

"Come, come, sir," I cried sternly, "you refuse to confess, but I warn you we know all about it. You never heard of Dr. Willoughby, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is the author of the silly pamphlet on Christian Science."

"Have you ever met this learned doctor, Mr. Macpherson?"

"Oh, yes. Dr. Willoughby is the pen name of Mr. Summertrees. He believes in Christian Science and that sort of thing, and writes about it."

"Ah, really. We are getting your confession bit by bit, Mr. Macpherson. I think it would be better to be quite frank with us."

"I was just going to make the same suggestion to you, Monsieur Valmont. If you will tell me in a few words exactly what is your charge against either Mr. Summertrees or myself, I will know then what to say."

"We charge you, sir, with obtaining money under false pretenses.

"Take, for instance, Lord Semptam. You sold him a table for fifty pounds, on the installment plan. He was to pay a pound a week, and in less than a year the debt was liquidated. But he is an absent-minded man, as all your clients are. And so you kept on collecting and collecting for something more than three years. Now do you understand the charge?"

Mr. Macpherson's head, during this accusation, was held slightly inclined to one side. At first his face was clouded by the most clever imitation of anxious concentration of mind I had ever seen, and this was gradually cleared away by the dawn of awakening perception.

"Really, you know," he said, "that is rather a capital scheme. The absent-minded league, as one might call them. Most ingenious. Summertrees, if he had any sense of humor, which he hasn't, would be rather taken by the idea that his innocent fad for Christian Science had led him to be suspected of obtaining money under

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false pretenses. Still, I quite see how the mistake arises. You have jumped to the conclusion that we sold nothing to Lord Semptam except that carved table three years ago. I have pleasure in pointing out to you that his lordship is a frequent customer of ours, and has had many things from us at one time or another. Sometimes he is in our debt; sometimes we are in his. We keep a sort of running contract with him by which he pays us a pound a week. He and several other customers deal on the same plan, and in return, for an income that we can count upon, they get the first offer of anything in which they are interested. As I have told you, we call these sheets in the office our visiting lists, but to make the visiting lists complete you need what we term our encyclopedia. We call it that because it is in so many volumes; a volume for each year, running back I don't know how long. You will notice little figures here from time to time above the amount stated on this visiting list. These figures refer to the page of the encyclopedia for the current year, and on that page is noted the new sale and the amount of it, as it might be set down, say, in a ledger."

"That is a very entertaining explanation, Mr. Macpherson. I suppose this encyclopedia, as you call it, is in the shop at Tottenham Court Road?"

"Oh, no, sir. Each volume of the encyclopedia is self-locking. These books contain the real secret of our business, and they are kept in the safe at Mr. Summertrees' house in Park Lane. Take Lord Semptam's account, for instance. You will find in faint figures under a certain date, 102. If you turn to page 102 of the encyclopedia for that year, you will then see a list of what Lord Semptam has bought, and the prices he was charged for them. It is really a very simple matter. If you will allow me to use your telephone for a moment, I will ask Mr. Summertrees, who has not yet begun dinner, to bring with him here the volume for 1893, and within a quarter of an hour you will be perfectly satisfied that everything is quite legitimate."

I confess that the young man's naturalness and confidence staggered me, the more so as I saw by the sarcastic smile on Hale's lips that he did not believe a single word spoken. A portable telephone stood on the table, and as Macpherson finished his explanation, he reached over and drew it toward him. Then Spenser Hale interfered.

"Excuse *me*," he said, "I'll do the telephoning. What is the number of Mr. Summertrees?"

"One forty Hyde Park."

Hale at once called up Central, and presently was answered from Park Lane. We heard him say:

"Is this the residence of Mr. Summertrees? Oh, is that you, Podgers? Is Mr. Summertrees in? Very well. This is Hale. I am in Valmont's flat — Imperial Flats — you know. Yes, where you went with me the other day. Very well, go to Mr. Summertrees, and say to him that Mr. Mac-

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pherson wants the encyclopedia for 1893. Do you get that? Yes, encyclopedia. Oh, don't understand what it is. Mr. Macpherson. No, don't mention my name at all. Yes, you may tell him that Mr. Macpherson is at Imperial Flats, but don't mention my name at all. Exactly. As soon as he gives you the book, get into a cab, and come here as quickly as possible with it. If Summertrees doesn't want to let the book go, then tell him to come with you. If he won't do that, place him under arrest, and bring both him and the book here. All right. Be as quick as you can; we're waiting."

Macpherson made no protest against Hale's use of the telephone; he merely sat back in his chair with a resigned expression on his face which, if painted on canvas, might have been entitled *The Falsely Accused.* When Hale rang off, Macpherson said:

"Of course you know your business best, but if your man arrests Summertrees, he will make you the laughing-stock of London. There is such a thing as unjustifiable arrest, as well as getting money under false pretenses, and Mr. Summertrees is not the man to forgive an insult. And then, if you will allow me to say so, the more I think over your absent-minded theory, the more absolutely grotesque it seems, and if the case ever gets into the newspapers, I am sure, Mr. Hale, you'll experience an uncomfortable half-hour with your chiefs at Scotland Yard."

"I'll take the risk of that, thank you," said Hale stubbornly.

"Am I to consider myself under arrest?" inquired the young man.

"No, sir."

"Then, if you will pardon me, I shall withdraw. Mr. Summertrees will show you everything you wish to see in his books, and can explain his business much more capably than I, because he knows more about it; therefore, gentlemen, I bid you good night."

"No, you don't. Not just yet," exclaimed Hale, rising to his feet simultaneously with the young man.

"Then I *am* under arrest," protested Macpherson.

"You're not going to leave this room until Podgers brings that book."

"Oh, very well," and he sat down again.

And now, as talking is dry work, I set out something to drink, a box of cigars, and a box of cigarettes. Hale mixed his favorite brew, but Macpherson, shunning the wine of his country, contented himself with a glass of plain mineral water, and lit a cigarette. Then he awoke my high regard by saying pleasantly, as if nothing had happened:

"While we are waiting, Monsieur Valmont, may I remind you that you owe me five shillings?"

I laughed, took the coin from my pocket, and paid him.

"Are you connected with Scotland Yard, Monsieur Valmont?" asked Macpherson, with the air of a man trying to make conversation to bridge over a tedious interval; but before I could reply Hale blurted out:

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"Not likely!"

"You have no official standing as a detective, then, Monsieur Valmont?"

"None whatever," I replied.

"That is a loss to our country," pursued this admirable young man.

"The blunders of our police," he went on, "are something deplorable. If they would but take lessons in strategy, say, from France, their unpleasant duties would be so much more acceptably performed, with much less discomfort to their victims."

"France," snorted Hale in derision. "Why, they call a man guilty there until he's proved innocent."

"Yes, Mr. Hale, and the same seems to be the case in Imperial Flats. You have quite made up your mind that Mr. Summertrees is guilty, and will not be content until he proves his innocence. I venture to predict that you will hear from him before long in a manner that may astonish you."

Hale grunted and looked at his watch. The minutes passed very slowly as we sat there smoking, and at last even I began to get uneasy. Macpherson, seeing our anxiety, said that when he came in, the fog was almost as thick as it had been the week before, and that there might be some difficulty in getting a cab. Just as he was speaking the door was unlocked from the outside, and Podgers entered, bearing a thick volume in his hand. This he gave to his superior, who turned over its pages in amazement, and then looked at the back, crying:

"*Encyclopedia of Sport, 1893!* What sort of joke is this, Mr. Macpherson?"

There was a pained look on Mr. Macpherson's face as he reached forward and took the book. He said with a sigh:

"If you had allowed me to telephone, Mr. Hale, I should have made it perfectly plain to Summertrees what was wanted. I might have known this mistake was liable to occur. There is an increasing demand for out-of-date books of sport, and no doubt Mr. Summertrees thought this was what I meant. There is nothing for it but to send your man back to Park Lane and tell Mr. Summertrees that what we want is the locked volume of accounts for 1893, which we call the encyclopedia. Allow me to write an order that will bring it."

On my notepaper he dashed off a request such as he had outlined, and handed it to Hale, who read it and gave it to Podgers.

"Take that to Summertrees, and get back as quickly as possible. Have you a cab at the door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, get back as soon as you can."

Podgers saluted, and left with the book under his arm. Again the door was locked, and again we sat smoking in silence until the stillness was broken by the tinkle of the telephone. Hale put the receiver to his ear.

"Yes, this is the Imperial Flats. Yes. Valmont. Oh, yes; Macpherson is here. What? Out of what? Can't hear you. Out of print. What, the

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encyclopedia's out of print? Who is that speaking? Dr. Willoughby; thanks."

Macpherson rose as if he would go to the telephone, but instead (and he acted so quietly that I did not notice what he was doing until the thing was done) he picked up the sheet which he called his visiting list, and walking quite without haste, held it in the glowing coals of the fireplace until it disappeared in a flash of flame up the chimney. I sprang to my feet indignant, but too late to make even a motion toward saving the sheet. Macpherson regarded us both with that self-depreciatory smile which had several times lighted up his face.

"How dared you burn that sheet?" I demanded.

"Because, Monsieur Valmont, it did not belong to you; because you do not belong to Scotland Yard; because you stole it; because you had no right to it; and because you have no official standing in this country. If it had been in Mr. Hale's possession I should not have dared, as you put it, to destroy the sheet, but as this sheet was abstracted from my master's premises by you, an entirely unauthorized person, whom he would have been justified in shooting dead if he had found you housebreaking and you had resisted him on his discovery, I took the liberty of destroying the document. I have aways held that these sheets should not have been kept, for, as has been the case, if they fell under the scrutiny of so intelligent a person as Eugène Valmont, improper inferences might have been drawn. Mr. Summertrees, however, persisted in keeping them, but made this concession, that if I ever telegraphed him or telephoned him the word *encyclopedia*, he would at once burn these records, and he, on his part, was to telegraph or telephone to me *The encyclopedia is out of print*, whereupon I would know that he had succeeded.

"Now, gentlemen, open this door, which will save me the trouble of forcing it. Either put me formally under arrest, or cease to restrict my liberty. I am very much obliged to Mr. Hale for telephoning, and I have made no protest to so gallant a host as Monsieur Valmont is, because of the locked door. However, the farce is now terminated. The proceedings I have sat through were entirely illegal, and if you will pardon me, Mr. Hale, they have been a little too French to go down here in old England, or to make a report in the newspapers that would be quite satisfactory to your chiefs. I demand either my formal arrest or the unlocking of that door."

In silence I pressed a button, and my man threw open the door. Macpherson walked to the threshold, paused, and looked back at Spenser Hale, who sat there silent as a sphinx.

"Good evening, Mr. Hale."

There being no reply, he turned to me with the same ingratiating smile:

"Good evening, Monsieur Eugène Valmont," he said. "I shall give myself the pleasure of calling next Wednesday at six for my five shillings."

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QUEEN'S QUORUM: *Part Eight*

by ELLERY QUEEN

THE sound, orthodox Scotland Yard professional, straightforward and unspectacular but with a very human passion for beer, emerged three-dimensionally in

77. G. D. H. and M. I. Cole's
SUPERINTENDENT WILSON'S HOLIDAY*
London: W. Collins, 1928

and in startling contrast to the dilettante detective of Sayers and the plodding policeman of the Coles the year 1928 performed a literary hat trick by producing

78. W. Somerset Maugham's
ASHENDEN
London: William Heinemann, 1928

Among the 1300 books which represent the entire publishing output of detective-crime short stories in the last one hundred years, only a handful, surprisingly enough, are devoted exclusively to the machinations of secret service agents. Many of the demi-detectives created by E. Phillips Oppenheim, William LeQueux, and Sax Rohmer flirt with international intrigue, but few of their books deal wholly with diplomatic skulduggery. Occasionally one of the great manhunters of fiction takes a fling at counter-espionage — Sherlock Holmes, for example, in *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* and *His Last Bow* — but these are random shots in otherwise stately, if not affairs-of-stately, careers.

Maugham's ASHENDEN lifts the secret service sleuth high above the con-

* How many readers have noticed that in the later books about Superintendent Wilson he is six inches taller than in the early ones? But that is unfair: all detective-story writers with a long list of titles to their credit have been guilty of equally unbelievable contradictions. One famous critic has long maintained that he can prove, quoting "chapter and verse" from the text, that Ellery Queen (the detective-character, not the authors) has committed bigamy — and we haven't the slightest doubt that he can!

Original version of "Queen's Quorum" from TWENTIETH CENTURY DETECTIVE STORIES, *edited by Ellery Queen. Copyright, 1948, by The World Publishing Company*

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ventional conception of the spy-catcher. His emphasis is not on plot in the usual blood-and-thunder sense; Maugham is too crafty a craftsman to subordinate realism and depth of characterization to tricks and counter-tricks. Maugham proved that the secret service story, like the detective story, has come of age.

In the following year, 1929, three more books added to the growing prestige of the detective story. The card-sharping exposés of Bill Parmelee, a specialist in solving gambling mysteries, were recorded in

79. Percival Wilde's
ROGUES IN CLOVER
New York: D. Appleton, 1929

and the only volume published to date on the criminal investigations of Professor Henry Poggioli, psychologist, appeared but failed to elicit the thunderous applause it deserved. Only in recent years, when

80. T. S. Stribling's
CLUES OF THE CARIBBEES
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929

was no longer readily available, even among second-hand booksellers, did it become eagerly sought after by readers outside the charmed circle of the cognoscenti. In 1945, however, Mr. Stribling began writing a brand-new series of Poggioli tales especially for "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine." These stories, based on unusual themes and handled in a decidedly unorthodox manner, are even better than the author's earlier ones. Their provocative quality is both arresting and rewarding — not only as intellectual exercises in detection and deduction but as philosophically mature concepts of crime. It is hoped that these new adventures of Professor Poggioli will eventually be published in volume form.

The anchor book of the year was in many ways the most important book of its decade: it both symbolizes and epitomizes the First Moderns. Published posthumously

81. Harvey J. O'Higgins's
DETECTIVE DUFF UNRAVELS IT
New York: Horace Liveright, 1929

represents the first serious approach to psychoanalytical detection. As the publisher wrote in 1929, every crime is committed in two places — at the physical scene of the crime, where the police investigate it, and in the mind of the criminal. Detective John Duff followed the second trail — deep in the mind of the perpetrator. He unravels one murder mystery by analyzing

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the victim's dreams; he discovers the identity of a thief who steals gold picture frames by probing the unconscious fears of the owner's wife; he solves a kidnaping by uncovering the suppressed desires of a beautiful debutante; he even invents a love charm as a psychiatric aid to detection.

Mr. O'Higgins's approach was consistently unusual. Earlier, as the result of having written a series of articles on the Burns detective agency, he saw the possibilities of depicting simple, realistic, private-eye work through the eyes of a typical American boy; his Barney Cook in THE ADVENTURES OF DETECTIVE BARNEY (New York: Century, 1915) is the most believable boy-bloodhound in the entire short-story field.

The decade of the First Moderns ended with the third book of short stories written by Frederick Irving Anderson, a master tale-teller. His first two volumes barely miss cornerstone status: ADVENTURES OF THE INFALLIBLE GODAHL (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1914) relates the larcenies of the closest American rival for the challenge cup held by England's Raffles: THE NOTORIOUS SOPHIE LANG (London: William Heinemann, 1925) is Godahl's female counterpart. The third volume of shorts

82. Frederick Irving Anderson's
BOOK OF MURDER
New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930

revolves principally about two characters — metropolitan manhunter Deputy Parr, and the "extinct" author, Oliver Armiston. The choice of the epithet "extinct" reveals Anderson's *mot-juste* turn of mind and recalls one of the most appealing gimmicks ever conceived: Oliver Armiston was so ingenious a writer of crime stories that to protect themselves from crooks using Armiston's ideas, the Police Department *paid* Armiston to quit writing. Frederick Irving Anderson's style is rich in detail and double-rich in expression; his premeditated indirection is an integral part of his mysteries and adds enormous zest to the literary battle of wits.

The First Moderns (1921–1930), including such stalwarts as Jim Hanvey, Hercule Poirot, J. G. Reeder, Dr. Eustace Hailey, Lord Peter Wimsey, Superintendent Wilson, Professor Henry Poggioli, John Duff, and Deputy Parr, accounted for fifteen cornerstones in the development of detection. The criminological chart shows a sharp decline compared with the twenty-three key books of the previous decade — a decline that was essentially one of quantity rather than quality.

VIII. The Second Moderns

As the detective-crime short story becomes more contemporary, the technical and thematic variations of its form become more apparent. All

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the subtle permutations reveal themselves — primarily in the tales, and secondarily in the frank expressions of purpose with which many modern writers preface their experimental books. For example, in

83. F. Tennyson Jesse's
THE SOLANGE STORIES
London: William Heinemann, 1931

the author reminds us that "the fun of anything consists in its limitations . . . the framework of rules saying what we can't do." Then, to extend the old concepts of formula, Miss Jesse created a woman detective "gifted by nature with an extra spiritual sense that warned her of evil."

In the same year, on this side of the Atlantic, an inspired journalist named Damon Runyon fashioned a new way of telling the crime story. As Heywood Broun wrote, "Damon Runyon caught with a high degree of insight the actual tone and phrase of the gangsters and racketeers of the town." In

84. Damon Runyon's
GUYS AND DOLLS
New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931

and in the books that followed, the reader meets a choice collection of cheap chiselers, chippie chasers, and cheesecake chewers — or to put it differently, the Runyon guys and dolls are Broadway banditti, metropolitan mobsters, Gotham gunmen, and Times Square thugs. The great modern interpreter of The Main Stem, however, leavened his tales of passion and violence with a unique type of humor which can only be described as New York Runyonese.

In 1932 Georges Simenon wrote three books of short stories which the late Alexander Woollcott regarded so highly that he included all three in his recommended library of detective fiction. The best contains the precise and pithy investigations of examining magistrate Froget in

85. Georges Simenon's
LES 13 COUPABLES
(THE THIRTEEN CULPRITS)
Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1932

The two other books in the series are LES 13 ÉNIGMES (THE THIRTEEN ENIGMAS) about G. 7, and LES 13 MYSTÈRES (THE THIRTEEN MYSTERIES) about armchair detective Joseph Leborgne, both issued in 1932 by Arthème Fayard. We had the pleasure of meeting Georges Simenon only once. Since we speak French feebly and Monsieur Simenon had not yet mastered the

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intricacies of the English language, we carried on a conversation through an interpreter who sat between us. Our heads swung back and forth between M. Simenon and the interpreter as if we were watching a tennis match at Forest Hills. Before long we were groggy — but not so groggy that we forgot to ask M. Simenon to inscribe our first editions of his three volumes of short stories, with the result that we now own what is probably the only inscribed and autographed set of Simenon shorts in all these United States.*

In 1933 the modern apotheosis of Raffles-and-Lupin appeared in his first book of short stories. Simon Templar, alias The Saint, has a "fierce and fantastic" audacity which emanates from the author himself. The blood of the romantic rogue in

86. Leslie Charteris's
THE BRIGHTER BUCCANEER
London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933

is one part picaroon-plasma, one part corsair-corpuscle, and one part milk-of-human-kindness. In most of his cosmopolitan adventures The Saint is a chivalrous crook in the truest sense — a present-day Robin Hood who can make crime pay *pro bono publico*.

In the same year the solid, stolid Inspector Poole accented modern English realism in the detective story — sedate English realism as distinct from the fast (and sometimes furious) realism of the hardboiled American detectivos. In a vein basically similar to the Inspector Poole stories of

87. Henry Wade's
POLICEMAN'S LOT
London: Constable, 1933

are the same author's tales of John Bragg in HERE COMES THE COPPER (London: Constable, 1938). This book is one of the very few which traces the vocational advancement of a professional policeman: in the first story Bragg is an inexperienced patrolman in the British hinterland and in the final story, supposedly three years later, he has risen from a humble copper to the exalted position of being a member of London's C.I.D.

One of the finest short stories of detection-and-horror in the history of the genre first appeared in book form in an anthology titled POWERS OF DARKNESS (London: Philip Allan, 1934). *The Two Bottles of Relish* is the

* Mention should be made of a recently discovered book of short stories about Inspector Maigret — LES NOUVELLES ENQUÊTES DE MAIGRET (THE NEW INVESTIGATIONS OF MAIGRET), published by Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1944. Translations of at least three of these Inspector Maigret shorts will appear in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine."

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only tale about detective Linley which Lord Dunsany ever "bothered" to write, but Mr. Linley's solo flight in deduction is so stupendous that it entitles him to a permanent seat at the Round Table of the great.

The female detective as visualized by contemporary American women's magazines — young, charming, romantic, and gushily emotional — is best exemplified in

88. Mignon G. Eberhart's
THE CASES OF SUSAN DARE
Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1934

and most representative of the wryly unhumorous detective-crime stories written by the creator of beloved Old Judge Priest are those the author did *not* dash off in

89. Irvin S. Cobb's
FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY
Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1934

"You should see me some morning when I'm in the mood for dashing off the stuff," wrote Irvin S. Cobb. "There I sit, dashing it off at the rate of about an inch and a half an hour, and using sweat for punctuation. I'm the sort of impetuous dasher that the Muir Glacier is . . . They say Thackeray worked three weeks over a single paragraph, and then threw it away and started in all over again. Every smooth, easy, graceful line means another furrow in the head of its maker. Nearly every recorded statement which deals with the verities means study, research, and patient inquiry." No truer words were ever written — about the detective story.

In 1934 our own first book of detective shorts appeared. One of the reasons we include

90. Ellery Queen's
THE ADVENTURES OF ELLERY QUEEN
New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1934

in this definitive list of cornerstones is John Dickson Carr's opinion of THE ADVENTURES and of the sequel which was published six years later — THE NEW ADVENTURES OF ELLERY QUEEN (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1940). Mr. Carr wrote: "The two books of Ellery Queen short stories are in a class by themselves."

But even in detective fiction Queen is topped by King. In 1935 Trevis Tarrant, gentleman of leisure, living in his New York apartment and tended by his valet, a Japanese doctor who is really a spy, becomes involved in extraordinarily strange and bizarre happenings. The eight "episodes" in

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91. C. Daly King's
THE CURIOUS MR. TARRANT
London: Collins, 1935

are in many ways the most imaginative detective short stories of our time. It is interesting to note that while the author is an American, whose home is in the United States, his remarkable volume was never published in his native land.

John Strachey once named Michael Innes, Nicholas Blake, and Margery Allingham "the three white hopes" of the British detective story. To date Messrs. Innes and Blake have not written books of short stories but

92. Margery Allingham's
MR. CAMPION AND OTHERS
London: William Heinemann, 1939

part of which appeared first in the United States as MR. CAMPION: CRIMINOLOGIST (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1937) has earned a cornerstone niche as one of the most literate volumes of short stories to come out of England in the modern age. Miss Allingham's style is deft and fluent; her plots are never cut-and-dried or mechanical and she always invests them with overtones of psychological insight. Her detective, the mild-mannered Albert Campion, is a lean amateur in horn-rimmed spectacles who carries on the 'tec tradition of suave dilettantism. He is the Universal Uncle of the upperworld and the underworld: the uppercrust (especially beautiful damsels in distress) come to him eagerly for advice and assistance, and despite the fact that Mr. Campion is so obviously a toff, he has won not only the respect but the affection of all the larcenists, petty and grand, in British crookdom.

(*to be concluded in the July issue*)

THE MYSTERY OF THE PERSONAL AD

by T. S. STRIBLING

THE ex-university professor, Dr. Henry Poggioli, was questioning me in his faintly disagreeable and didactic manner about the personal advertisements in the late edition of last night's *Tiamara Times*.

"Take this one," he said. "Just what would your interpretation of this be: 'Henry, forgive my carelessness and come back. Bessie.' "

I said I thought Bessie wanted Henry to come back. This irritated

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Poggioli — as I intended it should.

"I mean, what is the relationship between Henry and Bessie?"

"Married, I imagine."

Poggioli lifted a shoulder. "I don't know whether Henry is married or not, but Bessie is and Henry is her lover."

"What earthly proof have you for that conclusion?"

"No proof — only probability. Notice the position of the words 'carelessness" and 'come back.' If she had been his wife she would have advertised, 'Henry come back and forgive my carelessness' — because carelessness would have been the basic point at issue. But when she says, 'Forgive my carelessness and come back,' that places the stress on getting Henry back again. That isn't wifely — it is, if I may coin a word, 'mistressly.' Wives know very well that their husbands will come back, and they are in no stew about it."

"Well, there's no way," I pointed out, "to check up whether you are right or wrong."

"No, not conveniently. Let's try another. What can you do with this: 'J.L.J. deliver package to Fourth and Orange, twenty-three twenty-three, last notice.' "

"No signature?" I inquired.

"J.L.J. undoubtedly knows who wrote it."

"M — mm. Well, my interpretation is that somebody known only to J.L.J. wants J.L.J. to deliver a package to twenty-three twenty-three Fourth and Orange."

"What do you mean, twenty-three twenty-three Fourth and Orange?"

"That's the street address."

Poggioli made a hopeless gesture. "Did you ever hear of one address on two streets?"

"No-o, I don't believe I ever did. But why does it say twenty-three twenty-three?"

"That is the time it is to be delivered."

"Time? It couldn't be the time — there are only twelve months in the year. . . ."

"It's the hour and minutes on a twenty-four hour clock. It would mean twenty-three minutes after eleven P.M."

"But why should any man pick out eleven o'clock at night to deliver a . . ."

"I don't know. That's what makes it interesting — and a bit sinister. We can be sure there is some illegality in it somewhere."

There is no telling how much farther my companion's deductions would have led him, but at this point our doorbell rang and Poggioli broke off to wonder, "Maybe the man at the door will throw some light on this advertisement?"

This also annoyed me — his presumption in thinking that every little mystery he was interested in would eventually float around to him. I was glad when it turned out not to be. Our caller was a Captain Scambow, Chief of the Tiamara Homicide Squad. I knew little of Chief Scambow's ability as a detective — I never

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heard of him catching anybody, but I did have an impression that he found his calling highly profitable, if not to the city and society at large, at least to himself.

I knew he had come to see Poggioli about some case or other, and as I invited him in I asked what he wanted. He said it was a matter of robbery and disappearance; a kind of bank had been rifled and a kind of banker had disappeared.

"Not one of the big city banks!" I exclaimed hopefully, for that certainly would have meant a story big enough for me to write and sell.

"No, a little concern — in fact, a loan company."

"Oh, I see." My enthusiasm vanished as we moved through the hallway. To make conversation I said, "Well, a little man like that will probably get caught."

I did not especially mean this for cynicism; it was just a fact that if men took only small amounts of money in Tiamara, they were very likely to be caught.

When we joined Poggioli he asked no questions — he always prefers to form his first impressions on the actual scene of the crime. So the three of us — Poggioli, Scambow, and I — went out, got into the Chief's car, and rattled off downtown to the Teachers' Ever Ready Loan Company, located on the second floor of 321 Orange Circle.

It was a single, bleak room with a table, two or three chairs, a wastebasket with a newspaper stuffed in it, an old-fashioned breast-high bookkeepers' desk, and an old iron safe in the corner, its heavy door ajar.

A little man was on guard — a smoked, expressionless little man who looked like a janitor and turned out to be one. We learned later that when he entered the Loan Company's office that morning he found the safe in its present open condition, and so gave the alarm. The first thing Scambow asked him was if he had heard anything from Jones yet.

Poggioli inquired who was Jones.

"The man who was manager of this company," explained Scambow.

"You say 'was manager'," picked up Poggioli, with his usual finical attention to language. "You don't think he's manager now?"

"M — mm, now, that I don't know," hedged the Chief, "with the safe standing open and the money gone and Jones himself vanished. I suppose that is what caused me to say 'was manager.' "

"I see. And just what did you expect to hear about Mr. Jones from Mr. Peevik?"

"I didn't know. I sent a man to Jones's home to find out whether he was sick or not. I thought maybe my man had telephoned back and talked to Peevik here."

"No, Mr. Jones isn't sick," stated Poggioli.

His assurance amused me. I knew my friend had some reason for saying this so positively, but he always tried to play up his omniscience before strangers. Scambow asked how he was

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sure. Poggioli answered that the probability of the manager falling ill on the very night his company was robbed was too remote to be considered. He said he was sure Jones was in excellent health — or had been murdered.

Scambow gave a little shrug at this. "Well, my department doesn't reach conclusions in such a high-handed way. We check along, one thing after another, and see what has happened."

"You sent your man out to see if Jones were at home, but before you heard, you came and got me?"

That did seem queer. I hardly know why it seemed queer, but it did. Scambow waved the point away and indicated the rifled safe.

"I didn't expect Jones to be at home either. This shapes up like the same old story."

The psychologist stood there, looking carefully at the Chief and at the janitor. "Same old story, eh? Then why, Mr. Scambow, did you call me in on such an elementary situation?"

"Dr. Poggioli, it's like this. It's easy enough to see that Jones has run off with the firm's money. I got you to come here and tell us where he went. I wanted to know Jones' psychology of flight, where he'd go. Just tell me that, and I'll save the city of Tiamara thousands of dollars searching for him."

"Do what?" asked the scientist.

"Save the city considerable expense looking for him," repeated Scambow.

It was only in thinking it over afterwards that I realized the cynicism in Poggioli's surprise that Scambow should do anything to save the city money.

"You want me to deduce, from this lay-out, where Jones went?" summed up the psychologist.

"That's my idea, Professor," nodded the Chief. "I don't see how it could possibly be done — however, I have seen you do so many things that couldn't possibly be done . . ."

Poggioli began his job by a long series of questions to Peevik, the janitor. So far as I could see, he got nowhere. Peevik had been working for Jones for nineteen years. Yet he knew nothing about his employer. The manager of the loan company was about fifty; Peevik didn't know whether he was married or not, but he didn't think he was.

Scambow, puttering through the drawer of the old desk, remarked casually that fifty was the age a man often broke loose, whether he was married or unmarried.

"Tell me something else about Jones," continued Poggioli to Peevik. "Did he have any intimate friends that you know of?"

"I don't think he did."

At this point the office telephone rang. Scambow took it. It was the report from his man at Jones' home. Jones was unmarried; he rented a single room, and his landlady said that he had not been in his room that night.

This, of course, was expected; nevertheless, when it emerged as a certain fact, all four of us stood looking at

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the gutted office, a little shocked, as if we had not known it before. Finally, Scambow said, "In this miserable place, for nineteen years, without a wife or a friend. . . . I don't much blame him."

"How much money did he take?" asked Poggioli, off on a fresh start.

"We don't know," said the Chief.

"Maybe we can find out," suggested the psychologist. "The amount he took would determine more or less how far away he could go."

This sounded reasonable, so Poggioli took an old ledger from the ancient safe, carried it to the bookkeeper's desk, and began going through it. Scambow was doing research of his own at the table and at a receiving teller's cage that faced the door; but he kept a curious eye on Poggioli. Presently, the psychologist looked up from the ledger and said that Jones had got away with fifty thousand dollars.

Both the Chief and the janitor were obviously surprised.

"How did you find that out, Professor?" asked Scambow.

"This is the beginning of the month," explained my friend. "I took the income received last month, subtracted the accounts payable, added about ten percent as a reserve fund for a shoestring business like this, and arrived at about fifty thousand dollars. But what is surprising about that?"

"Well, that you got it at all."

"Maybe I didn't; maybe I'm all wrong."

The homicide detective gave a little laugh. "Maybe you didn't, but you sound like you did." Then he pointed to the table he had been examining. "Here's our lead, Professor Poggioli, as to what's behind all this.

"Jones has been following the ponies. Look at that . . ." He indicated a pile of old horse-racing tickets in the back of the table drawer.

Somehow this didn't seem exactly right to me, but Poggioli nodded in agreement. "That could be a reason for embezzling, Chief."

"Certainly it is, and it tells us where Jones has likely gone . . . Saratoga . . . Santa Anita . . ."

The betting slips were of various dates, reaching back for several years. In the drawer, along with the betting receipts, lay a small, ordinary, wooden screw. When Poggioli picked it up, it left its print in the dust. My friend turned to me and said, "Make a note of this screw."

"Why?" I asked.

"It will probably have a bearing on the outcome of this case."

I didn't quite believe this. Poggioli likes to make a monkey out of me occasionally, for his own pleasure; but I wrote down in my notebook that there was a wooden screw in the table drawer.

My friend picked up the racing tickets and the screw and stood looking at them in the abstracted manner he has when plunged in abstruse criminal analyses. Finally he said,

"Gentlemen, Mr. Jones could not possibly have taken that money."

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I wondered if the wooden screw had anything to do with it. It seemed to have. All of us asked the psychologist why Jones couldn't be the thief.

"Because no sane manager of a Loan Company would leave the evidence of his horse-racing activities here in an open desk, subject to the inspection of any stockholder who happened to enter this office."

Peevik, the janitor, licked his lips. "I never knew a stockholder to come into the office."

"Well, it's a business company, isn't it? Didn't they ever have directors' meetings?"

Peevik became more confused. "Not that I ever heard of."

"In nineteen years?"

"That's right."

"If it's a legally organized company, it has a stockholders' book. Let's look for that book."

He turned back to the safe, found the stock book, and started going through it. As he did so, he began talking of other things. He mentioned that he himself always had been interested in horse racing and had given some thought to betting theories.

This caught the attention of both the other men, as naturally it would; because if Poggioli should turn his marvelous powers on horse racing, he would almost certainly be able to pick the winner, or at least the horse that would place. Chief Scambow asked the savant to tell him his theory.

"And I imagine Mr. Peevik is also interested, aren't you?" inquired the psychologist genially.

"Y-yes, I really am," hesitated the janitor. "But why did you think I would be interested, Mr. Poggioli?"

"On account of your ring."

"My ring!"

"I never noticed that he was wearing a ring," said Chief Scambow.

"You wouldn't. Ordinary persons never notice rings unless they are expensive. Peevik's is a brass ring in the shape of a serpent holding its tail in its mouth."

"But what has that to do with horse racing?" asked Scambow.

"Not much, except that men who wear serpent rings lean toward the mysterious, the subtle, the bizarre, and the hazardous. That is why I knew he would be interested in my theory of horse racing."

"Well, yes, I am," agreed Peevik, pleased at being singled out as an exceptional man. "I worked out a horse-racing system of my own, but it wasn't much good."

"I imagine you and your employer, Mr. Jones, were very congenial when it came to racing gossip," suggested Poggioli.

"No-o. . . . no-o. . . . We really never mentioned the matter to each other," said the janitor.

Chief Scambow broke in with another wise smile. "Anybody connected with a financial company, Professor, can't very well afford to mention horse racing to anybody anywhere."

"Nevertheless, you would have thought . . . two racetrack fans . . . during nineteen years of association . . ."

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"Oh, no, never at all, Professor. A finance man bets absolutely on the q.t. He has to."

My friend apparently agreed with this, and presently came to a pause in his search through the stock book. "Here it is — a list of the stockholders and the amount of . . . Oh, this is one of those dummy companies. There are only five stockholders — four owning one share each, and J. L. Jones, the manager, owning all the rest."

"Well no wonder he didn't mind leaving his old racing tickets in his desk drawer," observed Scambow.

"I don't know about that," objected Poggioli. "Mr. Peevik here might have seen them."

"What do you mean — Peevik might have seen them?"

"I mean that Mr. Peevik is one of the other four stockholders. William Peevik . . . isn't that your name, Mr. Peevik?"

"Why . . . yes . . . that's me. I remember now . . . about sixteen or seventeen years ago, Mr. Jones asked me if I would take a share in his company. He said it was free, wouldn't be any liability and . . . and it might be a asset when . . . when he was dead . . ." Peevik broke off, staring, not so much at the stock book as at space . . . and time.

In the midst of this, Chief Scambow's mouth dropped open and suddenly he began laughing, incredulously at first, then uproariously.

Peevik now remembered the other three stockholders: one was a Jim Fredericks who had been Mr. Jones' barber; the others were a junk man and a tinsmith. All three were dead. At this Chief Scambow again broke into irrepressible laughter, and then abruptly said, "Well, I think I'll keep on looking around the office and see what else I can find."

Personally, I wanted to go home. I had about decided there was no salable story in the situation when Scambow drew the newspaper out of the wastebasket, spread it out on the desk, and looked at it. From an inner page a very small rectangle had been clipped. Scambow looked at this, was about to turn on through the paper, but then paused to look at it again. "Wonder what that was?" he said aloud.

"What?" asked Poggioli.

"This clipping. Somebody's cut a clipping out of this paper."

"Where is it?" asked the psychologist.

"Here among the personal ads. We can get another paper and find out what it was."

"Let me see . . . I read the personal ads every morning. They are the most human things a paper prints — tell more in less space. . . . Oh, this one! I remember it. Let me see . . . it said, 'J.L.J. deliver package to Fourth and Orange, twenty-three twenty-three, last notice.' "

A little breath went through me. Poggioli, you will recall, had suggested that our caller might have something to do with this advertisement. Scambow's face became illumi-

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nated. "What a memory you've got, Professor! That's our clue, with shipping directions attached. That ad undoubtedly was meant for John L. Jones . . . J.L.J. . . . see?"

"It probably was," agreed the psychologist.

"The package it refers to, of course, means the money. Jones owed somebody money — bookies, I imagine, from these slips. Peevik, did your boss attend racetracks in person or did he place his bets over the 'phone?"

"He never . . . uh . . . went to the races, Mr. Scambow, but . . . but I never heard him telephone a bookie either."

"Cautious man. He was cut out for a banker, but he evidently must have telephoned — these slips prove it — and he got a long way behind in his account with the bookies. But, of course, they would trust a banker . . . for a while."

"Why didn't the bookie call for his money?" inquired Poggioli. "Why didn't he telephone, why did he run a personal ad?"

"To keep everything on the q.t., Professor."

"But why should Jones have taken all his money?"

"Evidently he owed it all, and then some."

"Why do you say 'and then some'?" queried the psychologist.

"Well, Jones hasn't come back, has he? If he could have paid off in full, it's reasonable to assume that he would have come back, isn't it?"

"What do you suppose happened?"

"It seems to me there are two possibilities, Professor: when Jones read that notice in the paper, he could just have taken his money and beat it; or he could have gone out and tried to settle with 'em, and got into trouble. Of course, I'm not looking at it from your viewpoint — that's why I got you to come here. I wanted an expert's opinion."

All this struck me as being very clear reasoning on the Chief's part. There was nothing foggy about it. I had no trouble in following it, as I always do in following Poggioli's deductions. In fact, I could have thought up Scambow's ideas myself, and it seemed to me that the chief was a very well balanced man indeed.

That I was wrong, however, became clear when the four of us started out in the Chief's car for Fourth and Orange Streets, which was the address given in the personal ad. Scambow and Peevik sat in the front seat; I rode with Poggioli in the rear. The motor was not new and it made enough fuss so that Poggioli and I could talk privately. I said to my friend, "He's a pretty clever reasoner, isn't he?" and nodded at the front seat.

"A clumsy bungling thief," answered the psychologist.

I was amazed. "*Thief!*" I whispered; then I thought I understood. "Oh, I see — you mean his previous record with the Police Department" — because Scambow had been up before the courts, for conduct unbecoming to an officer.

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"No, I mean thief in this particular case. He's got that fifty thousand dollars."

"Then why did he consult you?" I asked in a whisper.

"He wants me to second his theory — that Jones paid all the money to some bookie or other. My say-so would quash any further investigation."

That threw a very strange light over what I had thought was a simple case. I rode on in silence for several minutes, trying to get my new bearings. Finally I said, "Why do you think Scambow has the money?"

"Because when I guessed fifty thousand dollars, both he and Peevik were greatly surprised. There was nothing to surprise them — *unless I had guessed the correct amount!* Both knew I was going to make some sort of estimate. If they hadn't known the correct amount, nothing I could have said would have stirred them up. But when I actually hit on the right figure, both of them were amazed. In fact, that is why I took so much trouble to figure out the exact loss. I knew Chief Scambow's reputation, and that was a simple way of finding out immediately whether or not he had the money."

I was utterly flabbergasted — Poggioli, so seemingly innocent and straightforward, laying such a mine under the feet of his apparent co-worker. At last I collected myself enough to whisper, "But what happened to Jones?"

Poggioli lifted a finger and shrugged imperceptibly. "I thought Peevik had murdered him until I found out positively that he did not."

"How do you know he didn't?"

"By Chief Scambow's laughter. There is something funny about Peevik being a stockholder. It couldn't be Peevik's murder of Jones — that isn't funny, even to Scambow. I am now trying to decide just what Scambow considers so funny."

"Then what could have become of J. L. Jones?"

"I don't know unless Peevik, for some reason, ran that idiotic ad in the paper and scattered his old racetrack tickets in the table drawer — perhaps to make it appear that bookies murdered him. That's why I called your attention to the print of the wooden screw in the dust. The old tickets left no print — they have just been put in the drawer. Peevik has to be the one who put them there — his system furnished him with plenty of losing tickets. Jones himself was no race-horse fan. Two racing men couldn't possibly have worked together for nineteen years and not become confidants. . . . No, that ticket business and the ad in the paper was just the sort of false trail some fool would think up who invented betting systems for horse races and who wore brass serpents on his forefinger."

"But that suggests that Peevik did kill his boss."

"Yes, it does."

"But the Chief's laughter suggests that Peevik did *not* kill him."

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"That is also correct."

"Then which is right?"

"We are on our way to inspect the body now — to find out."

I myself was not so sure there would be a corpse at Fourth and Orange Streets. Yet, I must confess, I looked forward to one. You see, my interest and that of Jones were directly opposed. Nobody can sell a detective tale to an American magazine unless there is a murder in it. If Jones were alive, he won; if he were dead, I . . . but there's no use going into that.

I must say that what we found on the corner of Fourth and Orange Streets was a sorry sight. Jones' scalp was beaten and bloody, and his neat banker's clothes awry. A policeman guarding the body called out:

"Chief, I thought you would never get here! I've had you paged in every police station and radio car. . . ."

"Don't worry, Sergeant, the murder is solved."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, this is the body of a banker, J. L. Jones, of the Teachers' Ever Ready Loan Company. He got behind in his gambling debts to the bookies. They lured him out here last night by an ad in the paper, took his money, and then killed him."

"Which bookies, Chief?"

"Who knows? With five thousand bookies all doing a brisk business in Tiamara, it is like trying to decide which mosquito bit a man."

"Why did they kill him?" asked Poggioli.

"Professor, that's a difficult question, and one I hoped you could answer. You see, we guardians of the law really don't grasp the psychology of law breakers . . ."

"I see that," nodded the criminologist.

"If I had to theorize, I might go astray. I depend more on my legs than on my theories. I don't know anything except what I look up. . . . I wish I had a brain like yours . . ."

"But you do have a theory after all?"

"Yes, it's this. I don't know whether Jones paid up his full debt to the bookies or not — probably not; but they killed him as an example — to scare other customers into paying off promptly, with no dillydallying. They can't lose anything by it, Professor. This murder will get results — wide publicity in the papers — hundreds of telephone bettors will read about it and come in and pay off their gambling debts. That's really why they ran that personal ad in the paper — the start of an advertising campaign."

Well, to my mind, there was a simplicity, an easiness to understand, about Chief Scambow's theory that drew me over to his side of the argument.

As for the criminologist himself, he stood studying the inert figure on the street corner in the deepest abstraction; he stood, one hand in his pocket, the other pulling at his bluish chin. I knew he was trying to form some hypothesis which would pull together

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all these very contradictory elements.

But that, of course, was impossible, and I cannot deny a certain secret satisfaction in my heart to see my friend's intellectual arrogance brought low. I watched him finally take out his handkerchief, stoop, and daub it on the stained head of the dead man. Of course, that meant nothing to me. He might just as well have taken the banker's coat or tie or one of his ears, so far as I was concerned. He walked over and gave the stained cloth to the policeman.

"Young man," he said, "get on your motorcycle and take this to Dr. Anson, 1516 Bougainvillea Avenue. Tell him I'll telephone him within a half-hour. I want to know the blood of these stains."

"Professor, I don't understand," began the Chief.

"I simply want to know if the blood on the outside of this man is the same as the blood on the inside. Very simple request . . . get along, my son."

The policeman looked at Scambow, who nodded grudgingly. Poggioli then turned to the three of us. "All right, Mr. Peevik, we will now go to your room."

Peevik and Scambow glanced at each other, but the four of us reentered the Chief's car and set out for Peevik's room, wherever it was.

"Uh . . . Mr. Poggioli, did . . . did you want any particular thing from my room?" asked the janitor, twisting around in the front seat.

"Just wanted to use your telephone. I'm going to telephone Dr. Anson pretty soon . . . I thought you and I and the Chief could analyze this case more quietly in your room than, say, at the Police Station."

"Oh, yes, we can," agreed Peevik eagerly.

I felt sorry for the murderer, for now I realized that Poggioli had settled on Peevik as the criminal. The way the little man grasped at not being taken to the Police Station moved me with that feeling of pitying contempt which we Americans feel for all criminals who have taken less than a quarter of a million dollars.

Peevik lived on the third floor, in the slum district which has made Tiamara famous. And as Poggioli predicted, he had a telephone, although it looked incongruous in that bare cubicle.

"Now, Mr. Peevik," said Poggioli, "in these dirty walls somewhere you have a spring which, if you touch it, opens a hidden closet. . . ."

Peevik wet his lips. "Mr. Poggioli, why in the world do you say that?"

"Because of your ring, Peevik, your brass snake ring. Men who wear such trinkets are of the intellectual age of boys — the type of boys who dig caves and form secret societies with mysterious rites and terrible oaths. Where is your secret closet?"

Peevik pointed an unsteady finger. "Right there, sir."

"The money's there, too?"

"Y-yes, sir."

The Chief of the homicide squad spoke up. "Peevik didn't kill Jones, Professor."

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"I know that, Scambow."

"How did you know it?"

"By your laughing . . . Tracing murders is your work, Scambow. Men never laugh at their own work — only at something apart from their work."

Poggioli went to the telephone and dialed a number. "Hello . . . hello, is this Doctor Anson? . . . Anson, you got the handkerchief I sent you? . . . . Well, I want to know the type of blood on it. I think it is probably of a different type from the real blood of the dead man I found it on. . . . If that's true, I'm going to take that fact and save the life of a janitor named Peevik. I'm going to prove that Peevik did not kill his employer . . . What? . . . What? . . . *Cat's blood!* Well, I'll be . . . "

Poggioli broke out laughing, and presently hung up. Answering my look, he said, "Certainly, I'll explain. Jones dropped dead in his office — overwork, heart attack, whatever it may have been. The janitor found his body, took the money in the safe, and then cooked up a wonderful scheme to make it appear that Jones was killed by bookmakers. He ran a personal ad in the *Times* and planted old betting tickets in the table drawer. The janitor then beat the dead man over the head to simulate foul play. But of course the corpse didn't bleed. He took the body out to dump it at Fourth and Orange Streets but was met by a police officer of the Tiamara Police Department. The two agreed on a split of the money, but they still needed some blood. So the officer shot a stray cat and . . . What? . . . What was the Chief's laughter about? . . . Chief Scambow was the officer. He couldn't help laughing at the thought that the janitor — *as the only surviving stockholder of the Loan Company* — could have had the whole business for himself, simply by *not* stealing the ready cash and *not* carting the body away."

"Q"

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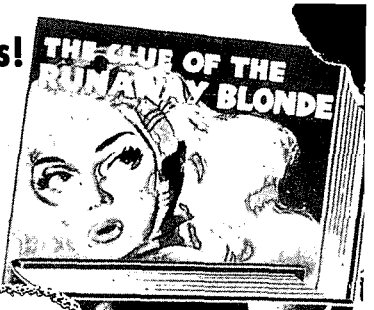

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